This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

ANDOVER-HARVARD LIBRARY
AH 5MZL 0

Harvard Depository
Brittle Book

Digitized by Google

372 Harvard Divinity School
.claren Library

FROM THE ESTATE OF
FRANCIS GREENWOOD PEABODY

Overseer, Lecturer,
Parkman Professor of Theology,
Plummer Professor of Christian Morals,
Dean, Professor Emeritus
1877–1936

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

WEEK-DAY EVENING ADDRESSES

DELIVERED IN MANCHESTER.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

WEEK-DAY EVENING ADDRESSES

DELIVERED IN MANCHESTER

BY

ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D.D.

NEW EDITION.

London:
MACMILLAN AND CO.
1879.

Digitized by Google
The Right of Translation and Reproduction is Reserved.

ANDOVER-HARVARD
THEOLOGICAL LIBRARY
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.
H 61.852
May 10, 1939

LONDON:
R. CLAY, SONS, AND TAYLOR,
BREAD STREET HILL.

Digitized by Google

CONTENTS.

ADDRESS		PAGE
I.	ELIJAH STANDING BEFORE THE LORD . . .	1
II.	THE OLD STORE AND THE NEW	11
III.	THE PRAYING CHRIST	19
IV.	THE ENCAMPING ANGEL	29
V.	HEROIC FAITH	37
VI.	THE CHARGE OF THE PILGRIM PRIESTS . .	45
VII.	CHRIST'S LAMENT OVER OUR FAITHLESSNESS.	54
VIII.	AN OLD DISCIPLE	63
IX.	"THE HANDS OF THE MIGHTY GOD OF JACOB."	72
X.	THE SHEPHERD, THE STONE OF ISRAEL . .	81
XI.	THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD	91
XII.	FEAR AND FAITH	103
XIII.	WAITING AND SINGING	112

Digitized by Google

ADDRESS PAGE

XIV. QUARTUS A BROTHER 124

XV. SHOD FOR THE ROAD 132

XVI. TAKING FROM GOD THE BEST GIVING TO GOD 142

XVII. SILENCE TO GOD 151

XVIII. THE VALLEY OF ACHOR 159

Digitized by Google

WEEK-DAY EVENING ADDRESSES.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

I.

ELIJAH STANDING BEFORE THE LORD.

1 KINGS xvii. 1.

And Elijah the Tishbite . . . said . . . As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand.

THIS solemn and remarkable adjuration seems to have been habitual upon Elijah's lips in the great crises of his life. We never find it used by any but himself, and his scholar and successor, Elisha.

Both of the men employ it under similar circumstances, as if unveiling the very secret of their lives, the reason for their strength, and for their undaunted bearing and bold fronting of all antagonism. We find four instances in these two lives of the use of the phrase. Elijah bursts abruptly on the stage and opens his mouth for the first time to Ahab, to proclaim the coming of that terrible and protracted drought; and he bases his prophecy on that great oath, "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand." And again, when he is sent to show himself to Ahab once more at the close of the period, the same mighty word comes, "As the Lord of Hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto him this day." And then again, Elisha, when he is brought before the three confederate kings, who taunt, and threaten, and

Digitized by Google

flatter, to try to draw smooth things from his lips, and get his sanction to their mad warfare, turns upon the poor creature that called himself the King of Israel with a superb contempt that stayed itself on that same great name, and tells him, "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand," were it not that I had regard for the King of Judah, I would not look toward you or see you. And lastly, when the grateful Naaman seeks to change the whole character of Elisha's miracle, and to turn it into the coarseness of a thing done for reward, once again the temptation is brushed aside with that solemn word, "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none."

So at every crisis where these prophets were brought full front with hostile power; where a tremendous message was laid upon their hearts and lips to utter; where natural strength would fail; where they were likely to be daunted or dazzled by temptations, either of the sweetness or the terrors of material things, these two great heroes of the Old Covenant, out of sight the strongest men in the old Jewish history, steady themselves by one thought,—God lives, and I am His servant.

For that phrase, "before whom I stand," obviously means chiefly "whom I serve." It is found, for instance, in Deuteronomy, where the priests' office is thus defined: "The sons of Levi shall stand before the Lord to minister unto Him." And in the same way, it is used in the Queen of Sheba's wondering exclamation to Solomon, "Blessed are thy servants, and blessed are the men that stand before thy face continually."

So that the consciousness that they were servants of the living God was the very secret of the power of these men. This expression, which thus started to their lips in moments of strain and trial, lets us see into the very

Digitized by Google

inmost heart of their strength. These two great lives, which fill so large a space in the records of the past, and will be remembered for ever, were braced and ennobled thus. The same grand thought is available to brace and ennoble our little lives, that will soon be forgotten but by a loving heart or two, and yet may be as full of God and of God's service as those of any of the great of old. We too may use this secret of power, "The Lord liveth, before whom I stand."

What thoughts then which may tend to lift and invigorate our days are included in these words? The first is surely this—*Life a constant vision of God's presence.*

How distinct and abiding must the vision of God have been, which burned before the inward eye of the man that struck out that phrase! Wherever I am, whatever I do, I am before Him. To my purged eye, there is the Apocalypse of heaven, and I behold the great throne, and the solemn ranks of ministering spirits, my fellow-servants, hearkening to the voice of His word. No excitement of work, no strain of effort, no distraction of circumstances, no glitter of gold, or dazzle of earthly brightness, dimmed that vision for these prophets. In some measure, it was with them as it shall be perfectly with all one day, "His servants serve Him, and see His face,"—action not interrupting the vision, nor the vision weakening action. To preserve thus fresh and unimpaired, amidst strenuous work and many temptations, the clear consciousness of being "ever in the great Taskmaster's eye," needs resolute effort and much self-restraint. It *is* hard to set the Lord always before us; but it is possible, and in the measure in which we do it, we shall not be moved.

How nobly the steadfastness and superiority to all

Digitized by Google

temptations which such a vision gives, are illustrated by the occasions, in these prophets' lives, in which this expression came to their lips. The servant of the Heavenly King speaks from his present intuition. As he speaks, he sees the throne in the heavens, and the Sovereign Ruler there, and the sight bears him up from quailing before the earthly monarchs whom he had to beard, and in connection with whom three out of the four instances of the use of the phrase occur. How small Ahab and his court must have looked to eyes that were full of the undazzling brightness of the true King of Israel, and the ordered ranks of *His* attendants! How little the greatness! how tawdry the pomp! how impotent the power, and how toothless the threats! The poor show of the earthly king paled before that awful vision, as a dim candle will show black against the sun. "I stand before the living God," and thou, O Ahab, art but a shadow and a noise. Just as we may have looked upon some mountain scene, where all the highest summits were wrapt in mist, and the lower hills looked mighty and majestic, until some puff of wind came and rolled up the curtain that had shrined and hidden the icy pinnacles and peaks that were higher up. And as that solemn white Apocalypse rose and towered to the heavens, we forgot all about the green hills below, because our eyes beheld the mighty summits that live amongst the stars, and sparkle white through eternity.

My brethren, here is our defence against being led away by the gauds and shows of earth's vulgar attractions, or being terrified by the poor terrors of its enmity. Go with that talisman in your hand, "The Lord liveth, before whom I stand," and everything else dwindles down into nothingness, and you are a free man, master and lord of

Digitized by Google

all things, because you are God's servants, seeing all things aright, because you see them all in God, and God in them all.

Still further, we may say that this phrase is the utterance and expression of a consciousness that life was *echoing with the voice of the Divine command.* He stands before the Lord, not only feeling in his thrilling spirit that God is ever near him, but also that His word is ever coming forth to him, with imperative authority. That is the prophet's conception of life. Wherever he is, he hears a voice saying, This is the way, walk ye in it. Every place where he stands is as the very holy place of the oracles of the Most High, the spot in the innermost shrine where the voice of the god is audible. All circumstances are the voice of God, commanding or restraining. He is evermore pursued, nay, rather upheld and guided, by an all-embracing law. That law is no mere utterance of iron impersonal duty,—a thought which may make men slaves, but never makes them good. But it is the voice of the living God, loving and beloved, whose tender care for His children modulates His voice, while He commands them for their good. He speaks because He loves; His Law is life. The heart that hears Him speak is filled with music.

Ahab and Jehoram, and all the kings of the earth, may thunder and lighten, may threaten and flatter, may command and forbid, as they list. They and their words are nought to him whose trembling ears have heard, and whose obedient heart has received, a higher command, and to whom, "across the storm," comes the deeper voice of the one true Commander, whom alone it is a glory absolutely to obey, even "the Lord, before whom I stand." People talk about the consciousness of "a

Digitized by Google

mission." The important point, on the settling of which depends the whole character of our lives, is—Who do you suppose gave you your "mission"? Was it any *person* at all? or have you any consciousness that any will but your own has anything to say about your life? These prophets had found One whom it was worth while to obey, whatever came of it, and whosoever stood in the way. May it be so with you and me, my friend! Let us try always to feel that in the commonest things we may hear the command of God, that the trifles of each day—trifles though they be—vibrate and sound with the reverberation of His great voice; that in all the outward circumstances of our lives, as in all the deep recesses of our hearts, we may trace the indications and rudiments of His will concerning us, which He has perfectly given us in that Gospel which is the law of liberty, and in Him who is the Gospel and the perfect Law. Then quietly, without bluster or mock heroics, or making a fuss about our independence, we can put all other commands and commanders in their right place, with the old words, "With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man's judgment; He that judgeth me, and He that commandeth me, is the Lord." In answer to all the noise round about us we can face round like Elijah, and say, "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand." He is my "Imperator," the autocrat and commander of my life; and Him, and Him only, must I serve. What calmness, what dignity that would put into our lives! The never-ceasing boom of the great ocean, as it breaks on the beach, drowns all smaller sounds. Those lives are noble and great in which that deep voice is ever dominant, sounding on through all lesser voices, and day and night filling the soul with command and awe.

Digitized by Google

Then, still further, we may take another view of these words. They are the utterance of a man to whom his life was not only bright with the radiance of a Divine presence, and musical with the voice of a Divine command, but was also, on his part, full of *conscious obedience.* No man could say such a thing of himself who did not feel that he was rendering a real, earnest, though imperfect obedience to God. So, though in one view the words express a very lowly sense of absolute submission before God, in another view they make a lofty claim for the utterer. He professes that he stands before the Lord, girt for His service, watching to be guided by His eye, and ready to run when He bids. It is the same lofty sense of communion and consecration, issuing in authority over others, which Elijah's true brother in later days, Paul the apostle, put forth when he made known to his companions in shipwreck the will of "the God, whose I am, and whom I serve." We may well shrink to make such a claim for ourselves when we think of the poor, perfunctory service and partial consecration which our lives show. But let us rejoice that even we may venture to say, "Truly I am Thy servant;" if only we, like the psalmist, rest the confession on the perfectness of what He has done for us, rather than on the imperfection of what we have done for Him; and lay, as its foundation, "Thou hast loosed my bonds." Then, though we must ever feel how poor our service, and how unprofitable ourselves, how little we deserve the honour, and how impossible that we should ever earn the least mite of wages, yet we may, in all lowliness, think of ourselves as set free that we may serve, and lift our eyes, as the eyes of a servant are towards his master, to "the living Lord, before whom we stand."

Digitized by Google

Such a life is necessarily a happy life. The one misery of man is self-will, the one secret of blessedness is the conquest over our own wills. To yield them up to God is rest and peace. If we "stand before God," then that means that our wills are brought into harmony with His. And that means that the one poison drop is squeezed out of our lives, and that sweetness and joy are infused into them. For what disturbs us in this world is not "trouble," but our opposition to trouble. The true source of all that frets and irritates, and wears away our lives, is not in external things, but in the resistance of our wills to the will of God expressed by external things. I suppose we shall never here bring these wills of ours into perfect correspondence with His, any more than we shall ever, with our shaking hands and blunt pencils, draw a perfectly straight line. But if will and heart are brought even to a rude approach to parallelism with His, if we accept His voice when He takes away, and obey it when He commands, we shall be quiet and peaceful. We shall be strong and unwearied, freed from corroding cares and exhausting rebellions, which take far more out of a man than any work does. "Thy word was found, and I did eat it." When we thus take God's command into our spirits, and feed upon it with will and understanding, it becomes, as the psalmist found it, the "joy and rejoicing of our hearts;" Elijah-like, we shall go in the strength of that meat many days. The secret of power and of calm is —yield your will to the loving Lord, and stand ever before Him with, "Here am I, send me."

We may add one more remark to these various views of the significance of this expression, to which the last instance of its use may help us. Here it is: "And Naaman said, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant.

Digitized by Google

But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none."

The thought, which made all Elijah's life bright with the light of God's presence, which filled his ear with the unremitting voice of a Divine Law, which swayed and bowed his will to joyful obedience, chilled and deadened his desires for all earthly rewards, "I am not thy servant." I am God's servant. It is not your business to pay my wages. I cannot dishonour my Master by taking payment from thee for doing His work. I look for everything from Him, for nothing from thee."

And is there not a broad general truth involved there, namely, that such a life as we have been describing will find its sole reward where it finds its inspiration and its law? The Master's approval is the servant's best wages. If we truly feel that the Lord *liveth*, before whom we stand, we shall want nothing else for our work but His smile, and we shall feel that the light of His face is all we need. That thought should deaden our love for outward things. How little we need to care about any payment that the world can give for anything we do! If we feel, as we ought, that we are God's servants, that will lift us clear above the low aims and desires which meet us. How little we shall care for money, for men's praise, for getting on in the world! How the things that we fever our souls by pursuing, and fret our hearts when we lose, will cease to attract! How small and vulgar the "prizes" of life, as people call them, will appear! "The Lord liveth, before whom I stand," should be enough for us, and instead of all these motives to action drawn from the rewards of this world, we ought to "labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him."

Digitized by Google

Not the fading leaves of the victor's wreath, laurel though they be, nor the corruptible, things as silver and gold, whereof earth's diadems and rewards are fashioned, but the incorruptible crown that fadeth not away, which His hand will give, should fire our hope, and shine before our faith. Not Naaman's gifts but God's approval is Elisha's reward. Not the praise from lips that will perish, or the "hollow wraith of dying fame," but Christ's "Well done, good and faithful servant," should be a Christian's aim.

May we, brethren, possess the "spirit and the power of Elias;"—the spirit, in that we know ourselves to be the servants of the living God; and then we shall have some measure of his dauntless power and heroic unworldliness!

Still better, may we have the Spirit of Him who was *the* Servant of the Lord, diviner in his gentle meekness than the fiery prophet in his lonely strength! Make yours the mind that was in Christ, that you too may say, "Lo, I come, in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, yea, Thy law is within my heart."

Digitized by Google

II.

THE OLD STORE AND THE NEW.

LEVITICUS xxvi. 10.

Ye shall eat old store, and bring forth the old because of the new.

THIS is one of the blessings promised to obedience. No doubt it, like the other elements of that "prosperity" which "is the blessing of the Old Testament," presupposes a supernatural order of things, in which material well-being was connected with moral good far more closely and certainly than we see to be the case. But the spirit and heart of the promise remain, however the form of it may have passed away. It is a picturesque way of saying that the harvest shall be more than enough for the people's wants. All through the winter, and the spring, and the ripening summer, their granaries shall yield supplies. There will be no season of scarcity such as often occurs in countries whose communications are imperfect, just before harvest, when the last year's crop is exhausted, and it is hard to get anything to live on till this year's is ready. But when the new wheat comes in they will have still much of the old, and will have to "bring it forth" to empty their barns, to make room for the fresh supplies which the blessing of God has sent

Digitized by Google

before they were needed. The same idea of superabundant yield from their fields is given under another form in a previous verse of this chapter (ver. 5): "Your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time, and ye shall eat your bread to the full:" which reminds one of the striking prophecy of Amos: "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed." So rapid the growth, and so large the fruitfulness, that the gatherer shall follow close on the heels of the sower, and will not have accomplished his task before it is again time to sow. The prophet clearly has in his mind the old promise of the law, and applies it to higher matters, even to the fields white to harvest, where he that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together. In the same way we may take these words, and gather from them better promises and larger thoughts than they originally carried.

There is in them a promise as *to the fulness of the Divine gifts*, which has a far wider reach and nobler application than to the harvests and granaries of old Palestine.

We may take the words in that aspect, first, as containing God's pledge that these outward gifts shall come in *unbroken continuity*. And have they not so come to us all, for all these long years? Has there ever been a gap left yawning? has there ever been a break in the chain of mercies and supplies? has it not rather been that "one post ran to meet another"? that before one of the messengers had unladed all his budget, another's arrival has antiquated and put aside his store? True, we are often brought very low; there may not be much in the barn but sweepings, and a few stray grains scattered over the floor. We may have but the handful of meal in the

Digitized by Google

barrel, and be ready to dress it "that we may eat it, and die." But it never really comes to that. The new ever comes before the old is all eaten up; or if it be delayed even beyond that time, it comes before the hunger reaches inanition. It may be good that we should have to trust Him, even when the storehouse is empty; it may be good for us to know something of want, but that discipline comes seldom, and is never carried very far. For the most part He anticipates wants by gifts, and His good gifts overlap each other in our outward lives as slates on a roof, or scales on a fish.

We wonder at the smooth working of the machinery for feeding a great city; and how, day by day, the provisions come at the right time, and are parted out among hundreds of thousands of homes. But we seldom think of the punctual love, the perfect knowledge, the profound wisdom which cares for us all, and is always in time with its gifts. It was that quality of punctuality extended over a whole universe which seemed so wonderful to the Psalmist: "The eyes of all wait upon Thee, and Thou givest them their meat in due season." God's machinery for distribution is perfect, and its very perfection, with the constancy of the resulting blessings, rob Him of His praise, and hinder our gratitude. By assiduity He loses admiration.

"Things grown common lose their dear delight." If in His gifts and benefits He were more sparing and close-handed," said Luther, "we should learn to be thankful." But let us learn it by the continuity of our joys, that we may not need to be taught by their interruption; and let us still all tremulous anticipation of possible failure or certain loss by the happy confidence which we have a right to cherish, that His mercies will meet our needs, con-

Digitized by Google

tinuous as they are, and be threaded so close together on the poor thread of our lives that no gap will be discernible in the jewelled circle.

May we not apply that same thought of the unbroken continuity of God's gifts to the higher region of our spiritual experience? His supplies of wisdom, love, joy, peace, power to our souls, are always enough, and more than enough for our wants. If ever men complain of languishing vitality in their religious emotions, or of a stinted supply of food for their truest self, it is their own fault, not His. He means that there should be no parentheses of famine in our Christian life. It is not His doing if times of torpor alternate with seasons of quick energy and joyful fulness of life. So far as He is concerned the flow is uninterrupted, and if it come to us in jets and spurts like some intermittent well, it is because our own evil has put some obstacle to choke the channel and dam out His Spirit from our spirits. We cannot too firmly hold, or too profoundly feel, that an unbroken continuity of supplies of His grace—unbroken and bright as a sunbeam reaching in one golden shaft all the way from the sun to the earth—is His purpose concerning us. Here, in this highest region, the thought of our text is most absolutely true; for He who gives is ever pouring forth His own self for us to take, and there is no limit to our reception but our capacity and our desire; nor any reason for a moment's break in our possession of love, righteousness, peace, but our withdrawal of our souls from beneath the Niagara of His grace. As long as we keep our poor vessels below that constant downpour they will be full. It is all our own blame if they are empty. Why should Christian people have these dismal times of deadness, these parentheses of paralysis? as if

Digitized by Google

our growth must be like that of a tree with its alternations of winter sleep and summer waking? In regard to outward blessings we are, as it were, put upon rations, and that He gives us we gather. There He sometimes does, in love and wisdom, put us on very short allowance, and even now and then causes "the fields to yield no meat." But never is it so in the higher region. There he puts the key of the storehouse into our own hands, and we may take as much as we will, and have as much as we take. There the bread of God is given for evermore, and He wills that in uninterrupted abundance the meek shall eat and be satisfied.

The source is full to overflowing, and there are no limits to the supply. The only limit is our capacity, which again is largely determined by our desire. So after all His gifts there is more yet unreceived to possess. After all his Self Revelation there is more yet unspoken to declare. Great as is the goodness which He has wrought before the sons of men for them that trust in Him, there are far greater treasures of goodness laid up in the deep mines of God for them that fear Him. Bars of uncoined treasure and ingots of massy gold lie in His storehouses, to be put into circulation as soon as we need, and can use, them. Hence we have the right to look for an endless increase in our possession of God; and from the consideration of an Infinite Spirit that imparts Himself, and of finite but indefinitely expansible spirits that receive, the certainty arises of an endless life for us of growing glory; a heaven of ceaseless advance, where in constant alternation desire shall widen capacity, and capacity increase fruition, and fruition lead in, not satiety, but quickened appetite and deeper longing.

But we may also see in this text the prescription of a

Digitized by Google

duty as well as the announcement of a promise. There is direction here as to our manner of receiving God's gifts, as well as large assurance as to His manner of bestowing them. It is His to substitute the new for the old. It is ours gladly to accept the exchange, a task not always easy or pleasant.

No doubt there is a natural love of change deep in us all, but that is held in check by its opposite, and all poetry and human life itself are full of the sadness born of mutation. Our Lord laid bare a deep tendency, when He said, "No man having tasted old wine, straightway desireth new; because he saith the old is better." We cling to what is familiar, in the very furniture of our houses; and yet we are ever being forced to accept what is strange and new, and, like some fresh article in a room, it is out of harmony with the well-worn things that you have seen standing in their corners for years. It takes some time for the raw look to wear off, and for us to "get used to it," as we say. So is it, though often for deeper reasons, in far more important things. A man, for instance, has been engaged in some kind of business for years, and at last God shows him, by clear indications, that he must turn to something else. How slow he is to see it, how reluctant to do it! How he cleaves to the "old store"! How he shrinks from cleaning out the barn, to bring in the new! Or a household has been going on for many days unbroken, and at last a time comes when some of its members have to pass out into new circumstances; a son to push his way in the world, a daughter to brighten another fireside. It is hard for the parents to enter fully into the high hopes of their children, and to accept the new condition, without many vain longings for the old days that can never come back any more.

Digitized by Google

So, all through our lives, wisdom and faith say, "Bring forth the old because of the new." Accept cheerfully the law of constant change under which God's love has set us. Do not let the pleasant bonds of habit tie down your hearts so tightly to the familiar possessions that you shrink from the introduction of fresh elements. Be sure that the new comes from the same loving hand which sent the old in its season, and that change is meant to be progress. Do not confine yourselves within any mill-horse round of associations and occupations. Front the vicissitudes of life, not merely with brave patience, but with happy confidence, for they all come from Him whose love is older than your oldest blessings, and whose mercies, new every morning, express themselves afresh through every change. Welcome the new, treasure the old, and in both see the purpose of that loving Father, who, Himself unchanged, changeth all things, and

> "—— fulfils Himself in many ways,
> Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

In higher matters than these, our text may give us counsel as to our duty. "God hath more light yet to break forth from His holy word." We are bound to welcome new truth, so soon as to our apprehensions it has made good its title, and not to refuse it lodgment in our minds because it needs the displacement of their old contents. In the region of our knowledge and of our Christian life, most chiefly, are we under solemn obligations to "bring forth the old store because of the new;" if we would not be unfaithful to God's great educational process that goes on all our lives. It is often difficult to adjust the relations of our last lesson with our previous possessions. There is always a temptation to make too much of a new

Digitized by Google

truth, and to fancy that it will produce more change in our whole mental furniture than it really will. No man is less likely to come to the knowledge of the truth than he who is always deep in love with some new thought, "the Cynthia of the minute," and ever ready to barter "old lamps for new ones." But all these things admitted, still it remains true that we are here to learn, that our education is to go on all our days, and that here on earth it can only be carried on by our parting with the old store, which may have become musty by long lying in the granaries, to make room for the new, just gathered in the ripened fields. The great central truths of God in Christ are to be kept for ever; but we shall come to grasp them in their fulness only by joyfully welcoming every fresh access of clearer light which falls upon them; and gladly laying aside our inadequate thoughts of God's permanent revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, to house and garner in heart and spirit the fuller knowledge which it may please Him to impart.

So the law for life is thankful enjoyment of the old store, and openness of mind and freedom of heart which permit its unreluctant surrender when newer harvests ripen. And the highest form of the promise of our text will be when we pass into another world, and its rich abundance is poured out into our laps. Blessed they who can willingly put away the familiar blessings of earth, and stretch out, willingly-emptied, expectant hands to meet the "new store" of Heaven!

Digitized by Google

III.

THE PRAYING CHRIST.

LUKE xi. 1.

As He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, one of His disciples said unto Him, Lord, teach us to pray.

IT is noteworthy that we owe our knowledge of the prayers of Jesus principally to the Evangelist Luke. There is, indeed, one solemn hour of supplication under the quivering shadows of the olive-trees in Gethsemane which is recorded by Matthew and Mark as well; and though the fourth Gospel passes over that agony of prayer, it gives us, in accordance with its ruling purpose, the great chapter that records His priestly intercession. But in addition to these instances the first Gospel furnishes but one, and the second but two references to the subject. All the others are found in Luke.

I need not stay to point out how this fact tallies with the many other characteristics of the third Gospel, which mark it as eminently the story of the Son of Man. The record which traces our Lord's descent to Adam rather than to Abraham; which tells the story of His birth, and gives us all we know of the "child Jesus;" which records His growth in wisdom and stature, and has preserved a

Digitized by Google

multitude of minute points bearing on His true manhood, as well as on the tenderness of His sympathy and the universality of His work; most naturally emphasizes that most precious indication of His humanity—His habitual prayerfulness. The Gospel of the King, which is the first Gospel, or of the Servant, which is the second, or of the Son of God, which is the fourth, had less occasion to dwell on this. Royalty, practical Obedience, Divinity, are their respective themes. Manhood is Luke's, and he is ever pointing us to the kneeling Christ.

Consider, then, for a moment how precious the prayers of Jesus are, as *bringing Him very near to us in His true manhood.* There are deep and mysterious truths involved which we do not meddle with now. But there are also plain and surface truths which are very helpful and blessed. We thank God for the story of His weariness when He sat on the well, and of His slumber when, worn out with a hard day's work, He slept on the hard wooden pillow in the stern of the fishing-boat, among the nets and the litter. It brings Him near to us when we read that He thirsted, and nearer still when the immortal words fall on our wondering ears, "Jesus wept." But even more precious than these indications of His true participation in physical needs and human emotion, is the great evidence of His prayers, that He too lived a life of dependence, of communion, and of submission; that in our religious life, as in all our life, He is our pattern and forerunner. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, He shows that He is not ashamed to call us brethren by this,—that He too avows that He lives by faith; and by His life—and surely pre-eminently by His prayers—declares, "I will put my trust in Him." We cannot think of Christ too often or too absolutely as the

Digitized by Google

Object of Faith, and as the hearer of our cries; but we may, and some of us do, think of Him too seldom as the Pattern of Faith, and as the example for our devotion. We should feel Him a great deal nearer us; and the fact of His manhood would not only be grasped more clearly by orthodox believers, but would be felt in more of its true tenderness, if we gave more prominence in our thoughts to that picture of the praying Christ.

Another point that may be suggested is, that the *highest, holiest life, needs specific acts and times of prayers.* A certain fantastical and over-strained spirituality is not rare, which professes to have got beyond the need of such beggarly elements. Some tinge of this colours the habits of many people who are scarcely conscious of its presence, and makes them somewhat careless as to forms and times of public or of private worship. I do not think I am wrong in saying that there is a growing laxity in that matter among people who are really trying to live Christian lives. We may well take the lesson which Christ's prayers teach us, for we all need it,—that no life is so high, so holy, so full of habitual communion with God, that it can afford to do without the hour of prayer, the secret place, the uttered word. If we are to "pray without ceasing," by the constant attitude of communion, and the constant conversion of work into worship, we must certainly have, and we shall undoubtedly desire, special moments when the daily sacrifice of doing good passes into the sacrifice of our lips. The devotion which is to be diffused through our lives must be first concentrated and evolved in our prayers. These are the gathering-grounds which feed the river. The life that was all one long prayer needed the mountain-top and the nightly converse with God. He who could say, "The Father

Digitized by Google

hath not left me alone, for I do always the things that please Him," felt that He must also have the special communion of spoken prayer. What Christ needed we cannot afford to neglect.

Thus Christ's own prayers do, in a very real sense, "teach us to pray." But it strikes me that, if we will take the instances in which we find Him praying, and try to classify them in a rough way, we may gain some hints worth laying to heart. Let me attempt this briefly now.

First, then, *the praying Christ teaches us to pray as a rest after service.*

The Evangelist Mark gives us in his brief, vivid way, a wonderful picture in his first chapter of Christ's first Sabbath-day of ministry in Capernaum. It was crowded with work. The narrative goes hurrying on through the busy hours, marking the press of rapidly succeeding calls by its constant reiteration—"straightway," "immediately," "forthwith," "anon," "immediately." He teaches in the synagogue; without breath or pause He heals a man with an unclean spirit; then at once passes to Simon's house, and as soon as He enters has to listen to the story of how the wife's mother lay sick of a fever. They might have let Him rest for a moment, but they are too eager, and He is too pitying for delay. As soon as He hears, He helps. As soon as He bids it, the fever departs. As soon as she is healed, the woman is serving them. There can have been but a short snatch of such rest as such a house could afford. Then when the shadows of the western hills began to fall upon the blue waters of the lake, and the sunset ended the restrictions of the Sabbath, He is besieged by a crowd full of sorrow and sickness, and all about the door they lie, waiting for its opening. He could not keep it shut any more than

Digitized by Google

His heart or His hand, and so all through the short twilight, and deep into the night, He toils amongst the dim prostrate forms. What a day it had been of hard toil, as well as of exhausting sympathy!

And what was His refreshment? An hour or two of slumber; and then, "in the morning, rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed" (Mark i. 35).

In the same way we find Him seeking the same repose after another period of much exertion and strain on body and mind. He had withdrawn Himself and His disciples from the bustle which Mark describes so graphically. "There were many coming and going, and they had no leisure, so much as to eat." So, seeking quiet, He takes them across the lake into the solitudes on the other side But the crowds from all the villages near its head catch sight of the boat in crossing, and hurry round; and there they all are at the landing-place, eager and exacting as ever. He throws aside the purpose of rest, and all day long, wearied as He was, "taught them many things." The closing day brings no respite. He thinks of their hunger before His own fatigue, and will not send them away fasting. So He ends that day of labour by the miracle of feeding the five thousand. The crowds gone to their homes, He can at last think of Himself; and what is His rest? He loses not a moment in "constraining" His disciples to go away to the other side, as if in haste to remove the last hindrance to something that He had been longing to get to. "And when He had sent them away, He departed into a mountain to pray" (Mark vi. 46; Matt. xiv. 23).

That was Christ's refreshment after His toil. So He blended contemplation and service, the life of inward

Digitized by Google

communion and the life of practical obedience. How much more do we need to interpose the soothing and invigorating influences of quiet communion between the acts of external work, since our work may harm us, as His never did Him. It may disturb and dissipate our communion with God; it may weaken the very motive from which it should arise; it may withdraw our gaze from God and fix it upon ourselves. It may puff us up with the conceit of our own powers; it may fret us with the annoyances of resistance; it may depress us with the consciousness of failure; and in a hundred other ways may waste and wear away our personal religion. The more we work the more we need to pray. In this day of activity there is great danger, not of doing too much, but of praying too little for so much work. These two —work and prayer, action and contemplation—are twin-sisters. Each pines without the other. We are ever tempted to cultivate one or the other disproportionately. Let us imitate Him who sought the mountain-top as His refreshment after toil, but never left duties undone or sufferers unrelieved in pain. Let us imitate Him who turned from the joys of contemplation to the joys of service without a murmur, when His disciples broke in on His solitude with, "all men seek thee," but never suffered the outward work to blunt His desire for, nor to encroach on the hour of, still communion with His Father. Lord, teach us to work; Lord, teach us to pray.

The praying Christ teaches us to pray as a *preparation for important steps.*

Whilst more than one Gospel tells us of the calling of the apostolic twelve, the Gospel of the manhood alone narrates (Luke vi. 12) that on the eve of that great epoch in the development of Christ's kingdom, "He went out

Digitized by Google

into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." Then, "when it was day," He calls to Him His disciples, and chooses the twelve. A similar instance occurs, at a later period, before another great epoch in His course. The great confession made by Peter, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," was drawn forth by our Lord to serve as basis for His bestowment on the apostles of large spiritual powers, and for the teaching, with much increased detail and clearness, of His approaching sufferings. In both aspects it distinctly marks a new stage. Concerning it, too, we read, and again in Luke alone (ix. 18), that it was preceded by solitary prayer.

Thus He teaches us where and how we may get the clear insight into circumstances and men that may guide us aright. Bring your plans, your purposes to God's throne. Test them by praying about them. Do nothing large or new—nothing small or old either, for that matter—till you have asked there, in the silence of the secret place, "Lord, what wouldest Thou have me to do?" There is nothing bitterer to parents than when children begin to take their own way without consulting them. Do you take counsel of your Father, and have no secrets from Him. It will save you from many a blunder and many a heartache; it will make your judgment clear, and your step assured, even in new and difficult ways, if you will learn from the praying Christ to pray before you plan, and take counsel of God before you act.

Again, the praying Christ teaches us to pray *as the condition of receiving the Spirit and the Brightness of God.*

There were two occasions in the life of Christ when visible signs showed His full possession of the Divine Spirit, and the lustre of His glorious nature. There are

Digitized by Google

large and perplexing questions connected with both, on which I have no need no enter. At His baptism the Spirit of God descended visibly and abode on Jesus. At His transfiguration His face shone as the light, and His garments were radiant as sunlit snow. Now, on both these occasions, our Gospel, and our Gospel alone, tells us that it was whilst Christ was in the act of prayer that the sign was given: "Jesus being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended" (iii. 21, 22). "As He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment was white and glistening" (ix. 29).

Whatever difficulty may surround the first of these narratives especially, one thing is clear, that in both of them there was a true communication from the Father to the man Jesus. And another thing is, I think, clear, too, that our Evangelist meant to lay stress on the preceding act as the human condition of such communication. So, if we would have the heavens opened over our heads, and the dove of God descending to fold its white wings, and brood over the chaos of our hearts till order and light come there, we must do what the Son of Man did—pray. And if we would have the fashion of our countenances altered, the wrinkles of care wiped out, the traces of tears dried up, the blotches of unclean living healed, and all the stamp of worldliness and evil exchanged for the name of God written on our foreheads, and the reflected glory irradiating our faces, we must do as Christ did—pray. So, and only so, shall God's Spirit fill our hearts, God's brightness flash in our faces, and the vesture of heaven clothe our nakedness.

Again, the praying Christ teaches us to pray *as the pre-*

Digitized by Google

paration for sorrow. Here all the three Evangelists tell us the same sweet and solemn story. It is not for us to penetrate further than they carry us into the sanctities of Gethsemane. Jesus, though hungering for companionship in that awful hour, would take no man with Him there; and He still says, "Tarry ye here, while I go and pray yonder." But as we stand afar off we catch the voice of pleading rising through the stillness of the night, and the solemn words tell us of a Son's confidence, of a man's shrinking, of a Saviour's submission. The very spirit of all prayer is in these broken words. That was truly "The Lord's Prayer" which He poured out beneath the olives in the moonlight. It was heard when strength came from heaven, which He used in "praying more earnestly." It was heard when, the agony past and all the conflict ended in victory, He came forth, with that strange calm and dignity, to give Himself first to His captors and then to His executioners, the ransom for the many.

As we look upon that agony and these tearful prayers, let us not only look with thankfulness, but let that kneeling Saviour teach us that in prayer alone can we be forearmed against our lesser sorrows; that strength to bear flows into the heart that is opened in supplication; and that a sorrow which we are made able to endure is more truly conquered than a sorrow which we avoid. We have all a cross to carry and a wreath of thorns to wear. If we want to be fit for our Calvary—may we use that solemn name? we must go to our Gethsemane first.

So the Christ who prayed on earth teaches us to pray; and the Christ who intercedes in heaven helps us to pray, and presents our poor cries, acceptable through His

Digitized by Google

sacrifice, and fragrant with the incense from His own golden censer.

"O Thou by whom we come to God,
The Life, the Truth, the Way;
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod;
Lord! teach us how to pray."

Digitized by Google

IV.

THE ENCAMPING ANGEL.

PSALM xxxiv. 7.

The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.

IF we accept the statement in the superscription of this Psalm, it dates from one of the darkest hours in David's life. His fortunes were never lower then when he fled from Gath, the city of Goliath, to Adullam. He never appears in a less noble light than when he feigned madness to avert the dangers which he might well dread there. How unlike the terror and self-degradation of the man who "scrabbled on the doors," and let "the spittle run down his beard," is the heroic and saintly constancy of this noble Psalm! And yet the contrast is not so violent as to make the superscription improbable. And the tone of the whole well corresponds to what we should expect from a man delivered from some great peril, but still surrounded with dangers. There, in the safety of his retreat among the rocks, with the bit of level ground where he had fought Goliath just at his feet in the valley, and Gath, from which he had escaped, away down at the mouth of the glen (if Lieutenant Conder's identification of Adullam be correct), he sings his song of trust and praise;

Digitized by Google

he hears the lions roar among the rocks where Samson had found them in his day; he teaches his "children," the band of broken men who there began to gather around him, the fear of the Lord; and calls upon them to help him in his praise. What a picture of the outlaw and his wild followers tamed into something like order, and lifted into something like worship, rises before us, as we follow the guidance of that old commentary contained in the superscription.

The words of our text gain especial force and vividness by thus localizing the Psalm. Not only "the clefts of the rock" but the presence of God's Angel are his defence; and round him is flung, not only the strength of the hills, but the garrison and guard of heaven.

It is generally supposed that the "Angel of the Lord" here is to be taken collectively, and that the meaning is —the "bright-harnessed" hosts of these Divine messengers are as an army of protectors round them who fear God. But I see no reason for departing from the simpler and certainly grander meaning which results from taking the word in its proper force of a singular. True, Scripture does speak of the legions of ministering spirits, who in their chariots of fire were once seen by suddenly opened eyes "round about" a prophet in peril, and are ever ministering to the heirs of salvation. But Scripture also speaks of One, who is in an eminent sense "the Angel of the Lord;" in whom, as in none other, God sets His "name;" whose form, dimly seen, towers above even the ranks of the angels that "excel in strength;" whose offices and attributes blend in mysterious fashion with those of God Himself. There may be some little incongruity in thinking of the single Person as "encamping round about" us; but that does not seem a sufficient reason for obliter-

Digitized by Google

ating the reference to that remarkable Old Testament doctrine, the retention of which seems to me to add immensely to the power of the words.

Remember some of the places in which "the Angel of the Lord" appears, in order to appreciate more fully the grandeur of this promised protection. At that supreme moment when Abraham "took the knife to slay his son," the voice that "called to him out of heaven" was "the voice of the Angel of the Lord." He assumes the power of reversing a Divine command. He says, "Thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from *Me*," and then pronounces a blessing, in the utterance of which one cannot distinguish His voice from the voice of Jehovah. In like manner it is the Angel of the Lord that speaks to Jacob, and says, "I am the God of Bethel." The dying patriarch invokes in the same breath "the God which fed me all my life long," "the Angel which redeemed me from all evil," to bless the boys that stand before him, with their wondering eyes gazing in awe on his blind face. It was that Angel's glory that appeared to the outcast, flaming in the bush that burned unconsumed. It was He who stood before the warrior leader of Israel, sword in hand, and proclaimed Himself to be the captain of the Lord's host, the leader of the armies of heaven, and the true leader of the armies of Israel; and His commands to Joshua, His lieutenant, are the commands of "the Lord;" and, to pass over other instances, Isaiah correctly sums up the spirit of the whole earlier history in words which go far to lift the conception of this Angel of the Lord out of the region of created beings—"In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His face saved them."

It is this lofty and mysterious Messenger, and not the hosts whom He commands, that our Psalmist sees stand-

Digitized by Google

ing ready to help, as He once stood, sword-bearing by the side of Joshua. To the warrior leader, to the warrior Psalmist, He appears, as their needs required, armoured and militant. The last of the prophets saw that dim, mysterious figure, and proclaimed, "The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple; even the Angel of the Covenant, whom ye delight in;" and to his gaze it was wrapped in obscure majesty and terror of purifying flame. But for us the true messenger of the Lord is His Son, whom He has sent, in whom He has put His name; who is the Angel of His face, in that we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; who is the Angel of the Covenant, in that He has sealed the new and everlasting covenant with His blood; and whose own parting promise, "Lo! I am with you always," is the highest fulfilment to us Christians of that ancient confidence: "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him."

Whatever view we adopt of the significance of the first part of the text, the force and beauty of the metaphor in the second remains the same. If this Psalm were indeed the work of the fugitive in his rocky hold at Adullam, how appropriate the thought becomes that his little encampment has such a guard. It reminds one of the incident in Jacob's life, when his timid and pacific nature was trembling at the prospect of meeting Esau, and when, as he travelled along, encumbered with his pastoral wealth, and scantily provided with means of defence, "the Angels of God met him, and he named the place Mahanaim," that is, two camps,—his own feeble company, mostly made up of women and children, and that heavenly host that hovered above them. David's faith sees the same defence encircling his weakness, and though sense

Digitized by Google

saw no protection for him and his men but their own strong arms and their mountain fastness, his opened eyes beheld the mountain full of the chariots of fire, and the flashing of armour and light in the darkness of his cave.

The vision of the Divine presence ever takes the form which our circumstances most require. David's then need was safety and protection. Therefore he saw the Encamping Angel; even as to Joshua the leader He appeared as the Captain of the Lord's host; and as to Isaiah, in the year that the throne of Judah was emptied by the death of the earthly king, was given the vision of the Lord sitting on a throne, the King Eternal and Immortal. So to us all His grace shapes its expression according to our wants, and the same gift is Protean in its power of transformation; being to one man wisdom, to another strength, to the solitary companionship, to the sorrowful consolation, to the glad sobering, to the thinker truth, to the worker practical force,—to each his heart's desire, if the heart's delight be God. So manifold are the aspects of God's infinite sufficiency, that every soul, in every possible variety of circumstance, will find there just what will suit it. That armour fits every man who puts it on. That deep fountain is like some of those fabled springs which gave forth whatsoever precious draught any thirsty lip asked. He takes the shape that our circumstances most need. Let us see that we, on our parts, use our circumstances to help us in anticipating the shapes in which God will draw near for our help.

Learn, too, from this image, in which the Psalmist appropriates to himself the experience of a past generation, how we ought to feed our confidence and enlarge our hopes by all God's past dealings with men. David looks back to Jacob, and believes that the old fact is repeated

Digitized by Google

in his own day. So every old story is true for us; though outward form may alter, inward substance remains the same. Mahanaim is still the name of every place where a man who loves God pitches his tent. We may be wandering, solitary, defenceless, but we are not alone. Our feeble encampment may lie open to assault, and we be all unfit to guard it, but the other camp is there too, and our enemies must force their way through it before they get at us. We are in its centre—as they put the cattle and the sick in the midst of the encampment on the prairies when they fear an assault from the Indians,—because we are the weakest. Jacob's experience may be ours: "The Lord of Hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our refuge."

Only remember that the eye of faith alone can see that guard, and that therefore we must labour to keep our consciousness of its reality fresh and vivid. Many a man in David's little band saw nothing but cold gray stone where David saw the flashing armour of the heavenly warrior. To the one all the mountain blazed with fiery chariots, to the other it was a lone hill-side, with the wind moaning among the rocks. We shall lose the joy and the strength of that Divine protection unless we honestly and constantly try to keep our sense of it bright. Eyes that have been gazing on earthly joys, or perhaps gloating on evil sights, cannot see the angel presence. A Christian man, on a road which he cannot travel with a clear conscience, will see no angel, not even the Angel, with the drawn sword in His hand, that bars Balaam's path among the vineyards. A man coming out of some room blazing with gas cannot all at once see into the violet depths of the mighty heavens, that lie above him with all their shimmering stars. So this truth of our text

Digitized by Google

is a truth of faith, and the believing eye alone beholds the Angel of the Lord.

Notice, too, that final word of deliverance. This Psalm is continually recurring to that idea. The word occurs four times in it, and the thought still oftener. Whether the date is rightly given, as we have assumed it to be, or not, at all events that harping upon this one phrase indicates that some season of great trial was its birth-time, when all the writer's thoughts were engrossed and his prayers summed up in the one thing—deliverance. He is quite sure that such deliverance must follow if the Angel presence be there. But he knows too that the encampment of the Angel of the Lord will not keep away sorrows, and trial, and sharp need. So his highest hope is not of immunity from these, but of rescue out of them. And his ground of hope is that his heavenly ally cannot let him be overcome. That He will let him be troubled and put in peril he has found; that He will not let him be crushed he believes. Shaded and modest hopes are the brightest we can venture to cherish. The protection which we have is protection in, and not protection from, strife and danger. It is a filter which lets the icy cold water of sorrow drop numbing upon us, but keeps back the poison that was in it. We have to fight, but He will fight with us; to sorrow, but not alone nor without hope; to pass through many a peril, but we shall get through them. Deliverance, which implies danger, need, and woe, is the best we can hope for.

It is the least we are entitled to expect if we love Him. It is the certain issue of His encamping round about us. Always with us, He will strike for us at the best moment. "The Lord God is in the midst of her always; the Lord will help her, and that right early." So like the hunted

Digitized by Google

fugitive in Adullam we may lift up our confident voices even when the stress of strife and sorrow is upon us; and though Gath be in sight and Saul just over the hills, and no better refuge than a cave in a hill-side; yet in prophecy built upon our consciousness that the Angel of the Covenant is with us now, we may antedate the deliverance that shall be, and think of it as even now accomplished. So the apostle, when within sight of the block and the headsman's axe, broke into the rapture of his last words: "The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me to His heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Was he wrong?

Digitized by Google

V.

HEROIC FAITH.

EZRA viii. 22, 23, 31, 32.

I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him. . . . So we fasted and besought our God for this. . . The hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. And we came to Jerusalem.

THE memory of Ezra the scribe has scarcely had fair play among Bible-reading people. True, neither his character nor the incidents of his life reach the height of interest or of grandeur belonging to the earlier men and their times. He is no hero, or prophet; only a scribe; there is a certain narrowness as well as a prosaic turn about his mind, and altogether one feels that he is a smaller man than the Elijahs and Davids of the older days. But the homely garb of the scribe covered a very brave devout heart, and the story of his life deserves to be more familiar to us than it is.

This scrap from the account of his preparations for the march from Babylon to Jerusalem gives us a glimpse of high-toned faith, and a noble strain of feeling. He and his company had a long weary journey of four months

Digitized by Google

before them. They had had little experience of arms and warfare, or of hardships and desert marches, in their Babylonian homes. Their caravan was made unwieldy and feeble by the presence of a large proportion of women and children. They had much valuable property with them. The stony desert, which stretches unbroken from the Euphrates to the uplands on the East of Jordan, was infested then as now by wild bands of marauders, who might easily swoop down on the encumbered march of Ezra and his men, and make a clean sweep of all which they had. And he knew that he had but to ask and have an escort from the king that would ensure their safety till they saw Jerusalem. Artaxerxes' surname, "the long-handed," may have described a physical peculiarity, but it also expressed the reach of his power; his arm could reach these wandering plunderers, and if Ezra and his troop were visibly under his protection, they could march secure. So it was not a small exercise of trust in a higher hand that is told us here so simply. It took some strength of principle to abstain from asking what it would have been so natural to ask, so easy to get, so comfortable to have. But, as he says, he remembered how confidently he had spoken of God's defence, and he feels that he must be true to his professed creed, even if it deprives him of the king's guards. He halts his followers for three days at the last station before the desert, and there, with fasting and prayer, they put themselves in God's hand; and then the band, with their wives and little ones, and their substance,—a heavily-loaded and feeble caravan,—fling themselves into the dangers of the long, dreary, robber-haunted march. Did not the scribe's robe cover as brave a heart as ever beat beneath a breastplate?

Digitized by Google

That symbolic phrase, "the hand of our God," as expressive of the Divine protection, occurs with remarkable frequency in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and though not peculiar to them, is yet strikingly characteristic of them. It has a certain beauty and force of its own. The hand is of course the seat of active power. It is on or over a man like some great shield held aloft above him, below which there is safe hiding. So that great hand bends itself over us, and we are secure beneath its hollow. As a child sometimes carries a tender-winged butterfly in the globe of its two hands that the bloom on its wings may not be ruffled by its fluttering, so He carries our feeble unarmoured souls enclosed in the covert of His Almighty hand. "Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand?" "Who hath gathered the wind in His fists?" In that curved palm, where all the seas lie as a very little thing, we are held; the grasp that keeps back the tempests from their wild rush, keeps us, too, from being smitten by their blast. As a father may lay his own large muscular hand on his child's tiny fingers to help him, or as "Elisha put his hands on the king's hands," that the contact might strengthen him to shoot the arrow of the Lord's deliverance, so the hand of our God is upon us to impart power as well as protection; and our "bow abides in strength," when "the arms of our hands are made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob." That was Ezra's faith, and that should be ours.

Note Ezra's sensitive shrinking from anything like inconsistency between his creed and his practice. It was easy to talk about God's protection when he was safe behind the walls of Babylon; but now the push had come. There was a real danger before him and his un-

Digitized by Google

warlike followers. No doubt, too, there were plenty of people who would have been delighted to catch him tripping; and he felt that his cheeks would have tingled with shame if they had been able to say, "Ah! that is what all his fine professions come to, is it? He wants a convoy, does he? We thought as much. It is always so with these people who talk in that style. They are just like the rest of us when the pinch comes." So, with a high and keen sense of what was required by his avowed principles, he will have no guards for the road. There was a man whose religion was, at any rate, not a fair-weather religion. It did not go off in fine speeches about trusting to the protection of God, spoken from behind the skirts of the king, or from the middle of a phalanx of his soldiers. He clearly meant what he said, and believed every word of it as a prose fact, which was solid enough to build conduct on.

I am afraid a great many of us would rather have tried to reconcile our asking for a band of horsemen with our professed trust in God's hand; and there would have been plenty of excuses very ready about using means as well as exercising faith, and not being called upon to abandon advantages, and not pushing a good principle to Quixotic lengths, and so on, and so on. But whatever truth there is in such considerations, at any rate, we may well learn the lesson of this story—to be true to our professed principles; to beware of making our religion a matter of words; to live, when the time for putting them into practice comes, by the maxims which we have been forward to proclaim when there was no risk in applying them; and to try sometimes to look at our lives with the eyes of people who do not share our faith, that we may bring our actions up to the mark of what they expect of

Digitized by Google

us. If "the Church" would oftener think of what "the world" looks for from it, it would seldomer have cause to be ashamed of the terrible gap between its words and its deeds.

Especially in regard to this matter of trust in an unseen hand, and reliance on visible helps, we all need to be very rigid in our self-inspection. Faith in the good hand of God upon us for good should often lead to the abandonment, and always to the subordination, of material aids. It is a question of detail, which each man must settle for himself as each occasion arises, whether in any given case abandonment or subordination is our duty. This is not the place to enter on so large and difficult a question. But, at all events, let us remember, and try to work into our own lives, that principle which the easy-going Christianity of this day has honey-combed with so many exceptions, that it scarcely has any whole surface left at all; that the absolute surrender and forsaking of external helps and goods is sometimes essential to the preservation and due expression of reliance on God.

There is very little fear of any of us pushing that principle to Quixotic lengths. The danger is all the other way. So it is worth while to notice that we have here an instance of a man's being carried by a certain lofty enthusiasm further than the mere law of duty would take him. There would have been no harm in Ezra's asking an escort, seeing that his whole enterprise was made possible by the king's support. He would not have been "leaning on an arm of flesh" by availing himself of the royal troops, any more than when he used the royal firman. But a true man often feels that he cannot do the things which he might without sin do. "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient," said

Digitized by Google

Paul. And the same apostle eagerly contended that he had a perfect right to money support from the Gentile Churches; and then, in the next breath, flamed up into, "I have used none of these things, for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void." A sensitive spirit, or one profoundly stirred by religious emotion, will, like the apostle whose feet were moved by love, far outrun the slower soul, whose steps are only impelled by the thought of duty. Better that the cup should run over than that it should not be full. Where we delight to do His will, there will often be more than a scrupulously regulated enough; and where there is not sometimes that "more," there will never be enough.

> "Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the lore
> Of nicely calculated less or more."

What shall we say of people who profess that God is their portion, and are as eager in the scramble for money as anybody? What kind of a commentary will sharp-sighted, sharp-tongued observers have a right to make on us, whose creed is so unlike theirs, while our lives are identical? Do you believe, friends, that "the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him"? Then, do you not think that racing after the prizes of this world, with flushed cheeks and labouring breath, or longing, with a gnawing hunger of heart, for any earthly good, or lamenting over the removal of creatural defences and joys, as if heaven were empty because some one's place here is, or as if God were dead because dear ones die, may well be a shame to us, and a taunt on the lips of our enemies. Let us learn again the lesson from this old story,—that if our faith in God is not the veriest sham, it demands, and will produce, the abandonment some

Digitized by Google

times, the subordination always, of external helps and material good.

Notice, too, Ezra's preparation for receiving the Divine Help. There, by the river Ahava, he halts his company like a prudent leader, to repair omissions, and put the last touches to their organization before facing the wilderness. But he has another purpose also. "I proclaimed a fast there, to seek of God a right way for us." There was no fool-hardiness in his courage; he was well aware of all the possible dangers on the road; and whilst he is confident of the Divine protection, he knows that, in his own quiet, matter-of-fact words, it is given "to all them that *seek* Him." So his faith not only impels him to the renunciation of the Babylonian guard, but to earnest supplication for the defence in which he is so confident. He is sure it will be given—so sure, that he will have no other shield; and yet he fasts and prays that he and his company may receive it. He prays because he is sure that he will receive it, and does receive it because he prays and is sure.

So for us, the condition and preparation on and by which we are sheltered by that great hand, is the faith that asks, and the asking of faith. We must forsake the earthly props, but we must also believingly desire to be upheld by the heavenly arms. We make God responsible for our safety when we abandon other defence, and commit ourselves to Him. With eyes open to our dangers, and full consciousness of our own unarmed and unwarlike weakness, let us solemnly commend ourselves to Him, rolling all our burden on His strong arms, knowing that He is able to keep that which we have committed to Him. He will accept the trust, and set His guards about us. As the song of the returning exiles, which may

Digitized by Google

have been sung by the river Ahava, has it: "My help cometh from the Lord. The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand."

So our story ends with the triumphant vindication of this Quixotic faith. A flash of joyful feeling breaks through the simple narrative, as it tells how the words spoken before the king came true in the experience of the weaponless pilgrims: "The hand of our God *was* upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way; and we came to Jerusalem." It was no rash venture that we made. He was all that we hoped and asked. Through all the weary march He led us. From the wild, desert-born robbers, that watched us from afar, ready to come down on us, from ambushes and hidden perils, He kept us, because we had none other help, and all our hope was in Him. The ventures of faith are ever rewarded. We cannot set our expectations from God too high. What we dare scarcely hope now we shall one day remember. When we come to tell the completed story of our lives, we shall have to record the fulfilment of all God's promises, and the accomplishment of all our prayers that were built on these. Here let us cry, "Be Thy hand upon us." Here let us trust Thy hand shall be upon us. Then we shall have to say, "The hand of our God was upon us." And as we look from the watch-towers of the city, on the desert that stretches to its very walls, and remember all the way by which He led us, we shall rejoice over His vindication of our poor faith, and praise Him that "not one thing hath failed of all the things which the Lord our God spake concerning us."

Digitized by Google

VI.

THE CHARGE OF THE PILGRIM PRIESTS.

EZRA viii. 29.

Watch ye, and keep *them*, until ye weigh *them* . . . at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the Lord.

THE little band of Jews, seventeen hundred in number, returning from Babylon, had just started on that long pilgrimage, and made a brief halt in order to get everything in order for their transit across the desert; when their leader, Ezra, taking count of his men, discovers that amongst them there are none of the priests or Levites. He then takes measures to reinforce his little army with a contingent of these, and entrusts to their special care a very valuable treasure in gold, and silver, and sacrificial vessels, which had been given to them for use in the house of the Lord. The words which I have read to you are a portion of the charge which he gave to those twelve priestly guardians of the precious things, that were to be used in worship when they got back to the Temple. "Watch and keep them, until ye weigh them in the chambers of the house of the Lord."

So I think I may venture, without being unduly fanciful, to take these words as a type of the injunctions which are given to us Christian people; and to see in them a

Digitized by Google

striking and picturesque representation of the duties that devolve upon us in the course of our journey across the desert to the Temple-Home above.

And, to begin with, let me remind you, for a moment or two, *what the precious treasure is* which is thus entrusted to our keeping and care. We can scarcely, in such a connection and with such a metaphor, forget the words of our Lord about a certain king that went to receive his kingdom, and to return; who called together his servants, and gave to each of them according to their several ability, with the injunction to trade upon that until he came. The same metaphor which our Master employed lies in this story before us,—in the one case, sacrificial vessels and sacred treasures; in the other case, the talents out of the rich possessions of the departing king.

Nor can we forget, either, the other phase of the same figure, which the Apostle employs when he says to his "own son" and substitute, Timothy; "That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us." Nor that other word to the same Timothy, which says: "O Timothy, keep that which was committed to thy trust, and avoid profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science, falsely so called."

In these quotations, the treasure, and the rich deposit, is the faith once delivered to the saints; the solemn message of love and peace in Jesus Christ, which was entrusted, first of all to those preachers, but as truly to every one of Christ's disciples.

So, then, the metaphor is capable of two applications. The first is to the rich treasure and solemn trust of our own nature, of our own souls; the faculties and capacities, precious beyond all count, rich beyond all else that a

Digitized by Google

man has ever received. Nothing that you have is half so much as that which you are. The possession of a soul that knows and loves, and can obey; that trusts and desires; that can yearn and reach out to Jesus Christ, and to God in Christ; of a conscience that can yield to His command; and faculties of comprehending and understanding what comes to them from Jesus Christ—that is more than any other possession, treasure, or trust. That which you and I carry with us,—the infinite possibilities of these awful spirits of ours,—the tremendous faculties which are given to every human soul, and which, like a candle plunged into oxygen, are meant to burn far more brightly under the stimulus of Christian faith and the possession of God's truth, are the rich deposit committed to our charge. You priests of the living God! you men and women, who say that you are Christ's, and therefore are consecrated to a nobler priesthood than any other—to you is given this solemn charge: "That good thing which is committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost that dwelleth in you." The precious treasure of your own natures, your own hearts, your own understandings, wills, consciences, desires—keep these, until they are weighed in the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

And in like manner, taking the other aspect of the metaphor—we have given to us, in order that we may do something with it, that great deposit and treasure of truth, which is all embodied and incarnated in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is bestowed upon us that we may use it for ourselves, and in order that we may carry it triumphantly all through the world. Possession involves responsibility always. The word of salvation is given to us. If we go tampering with it, by erroneous apprehension, by unfair usage, by failing to apply it to our own daily life;

Digitized by Google

then it will fade and disappear from our grasp. It is given to us in order that we may keep it safe, and carry it high up, across the desert, as becomes the priests of the most high God.

The treasure is first—our own selves,—with all that we are and may be, under the stimulating and quickening influence of His grace and spirit. The treasure is next—His great word of salvation, once delivered unto the saints, and to be handed on, without diminution or alteration in its fair perspective and manifold harmonies, to the generations that are to come. So, think of yourselves as the priests of God, journeying through the wilderness, with the treasures of the temple and the vessels of the sacrifice for your special deposit and charge.

Well, then, a word next as to the *command*, the guardianship that is here set forth. "Watch ye, and keep them." That is to say, I suppose, according to the ordinary idiom of the Old Testament, Watch, in order that you may keep. Or to translate it into other words: The treasure which is given into our hands requires, for its safe preservation, unceasing vigilance. Take the picture of my text: These Jews were four months, according to the narrative, in travelling from their first station upon their journey up to Jerusalem across the desert. There were enemies lying in wait for them by the way. With noble self-restraint and grand chivalry, the leader of the little band says: "I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen, to help us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God *is* upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and His wrath *is* against all that forsake Him." And so they would not go to him, cap in hand, and ask him to give them a guard to take

Digitized by Google

care of them; but "We fasted and besought our God for this; and He was intreated of us."

Thus the little company, without arms, without protection, with nothing but a prayer and a trust to make them strong, flung themselves into the pathless desert with all those precious things in their possession; and all the precaution which Ezra took was to lay hold of the priests in the little party, and to say: "Here! all through the march do you stick by these precious things. Whoever sleeps, do you watch. Whoever is careless, be you vigilant. Take these for your charge, and remember I weigh them here before we start, and they will be all weighed again when we get there. So bethink yourselves."

And is not that exactly what Christ says to us? "Watch; keep them; be vigilant, that ye may keep; and keep them, because they will be weighed and registered when you arrive there."

I cannot do more than touch upon two or three of the ways in which this charge may be worked out, in its application for ourselves, beginning with that first one which is implied in the words of the text—*unslumbering vigilance;* then *trust,* like the trust which is glorified in the context, depending only on "the good hand of our God upon us;" then *purity,* because, as Ezra said, "Ye are holy unto the Lord. The vessels are holy also;" and therefore ye are the fit persons to guard them. And besides that, there is in our keeping our trust, a method which does not apply to the incident before us; namely, *use,* in order to their preservation.

That is to say, first of all, no slumber; not a moment's relaxation; or some of those who lie in wait for us on the way will be down upon us, and some of the precious things will go. While all the rest of the wearied camp

Digitized by Google

slept, the guardians of the treasure had to outwatch the stars. While others might straggle on the march, lingering here or there, or resting on some patch of green, they had to close up round their precious charge; others might let their eyes wander from the path, they had ever to look to their care. For them the journey had a double burden, and unslumbering vigilance was their constant duty.

We likewise have unslumberingly and ceaselessly to watch over that which is committed to our charge. For, depend upon it, if for an instant we turn away our heads, the thievish birds that flutter over us will be down upon the precious seed that is in our basket, or that we have sown in the furrows, and it will be gone. Watch, that ye may keep.

And then, still further, see how in this story before us there are brought out very picturesquely, and very simply, deeper lessons still. It is not enough that a man shall be for ever keeping his eye upon his own character and his own faculties, and seeking sedulously to cultivate and improve them, as he that must give an account. There must be another look than that. Ezra said, in effect, "Not all the cohorts of Babylon can help us; and we do not want them. We have one strong hand that will keep us safe;" and so he, and his men, with all this mass of wealth, so tempting to the wild robbers that haunted the road, flung themselves into the desert, knowing that all along it there were, as he says, "such as lay in wait for them." His confidence was: "God will bring us all safe out to the end there; and we shall carry every glittering piece of the precious things that we brought out of Babylon right into the Temple of Jerusalem." Yet he says, "Watch ye and keep them."

Digitized by Google

What does that come to in reference to our religious experience? Why this: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of His own great pleasure." You do not need these external helps. Fling yourself wholly upon His keeping hand, and also watch and keep yourselves. "I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day," is the complement of the other words, "That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost."

So guardianship is, first, unceasing vigilance; and then it is lowly trust. And besides that, it is *punctilious purity*. "I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy unto the Lord. Watch ye, and keep them."

It was fitting that the priests should carry the things that belonged to the Temple. No other hands but consecrated hands had a right to touch them. To none other guardianship but the guardianship of the possessors of a symbolic and ceremonial purity, could the vessels of a symbolic and ceremonial worship be entrusted; and to none others but the possessors of real and spiritual holiness can the treasures of the true Temple, of an inward and spiritual worship, be entrusted. "Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord," said Isaiah long after. The only way to keep our treasure undiminished and untarnished, is to keep ourselves pure and clean.

And, lastly, we have to exercise a guardianship which is not only unslumbering vigilance, lowly trust, punctilious purity, but also requires the constant *use* of the treasure.

"Watch ye, and keep them." Although the vessels which those priests bore through the desert were used for

Digitized by Google

no service during all the weary march, they weighed just the same when they got to the end as at the beginning; though, no doubt, even their fine gold had become dim and tarnished through disuse. But if we do not use the vessels that are entrusted to our care, *they* will *not* weigh the same. The man that wrapped up his talent in the napkin, and said, "Lo, there thou hast that is thine," was too sanguine. There was never an unused talent rolled up in a handkerchief yet, but when it was taken out and put into the scales it was lighter than when it was committed to the keeping of the earth. Gifts that are used fructify. Capacities that are strained to the uttermost increase. Service strengthens the power of service; and just as the reward of work is more work, the way for making ourselves fit for bigger things is to do the things that are lying by us. The blacksmith's arm, the sailor's eye, the organs of any piece of handicraft, as we all know, are strengthened by exercise; and so it is in this higher region.

And so, dear brethren, take these four words—vigilance, trust, purity, exercise. Watch ye, and keep them, until they are weighed in the chambers of the House of the Lord.

And, lastly, think of that weighing in the House of the Lord. Cannot you see the picture of the little band when they finally reach the goal of their pilgrimage; and three days after they arrived, as the narrative tells us, went up into the Temple, and there, by number and by weight, rendered up their charge, and were clear of their responsibility? "And the first came and said, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds. And he said, Well, thou good servant, because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities."

Digitized by Google

Oh, how that thought of the day when they would empty out the rich treasure upon the marble pavement, and clash the golden vessels into the scales, must have filled their hearts with vigilance during all the weary watches, when desert stars looked down upon the slumbering encampment, and they paced wakeful all the night. And how the thought, too, must have filled their hearts with joy, when they tried to picture to themselves the sigh of satisfaction and the sense of relief with which, after all the perils, their "feet would stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem," and they would be able to say, "That which thou hast given me I have kept, and nothing of it is lost."

A lifetime would be a small expenditure to secure that; and though it cannot be that you and I shall meet the trial and the weighing of that great day without many a flaw and much loss, yet we may say: "I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep my deposit—whether it be in the sense of that which I have committed unto Him, or in the sense of that which He has committed unto me—against that day." We may hope that, by His gracious help and His pitying acceptance, even such careless stewards and negligent watchmen as we are, may lay ourselves down in peace at the last, saying, "I have kept the faith;" and may be awakened by the word, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Digitized by Google

VII.

CHRIST'S LAMENT OVER OUR FAITHLESSNESS.

MARK ix. 19.

He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?

THERE is a very evident, and, I think, intentional contrast between the two scenes, of the transfiguration, and of this healing of the maniac boy. And in nothing is the contrast more marked than in the demeanour of these enfeebled and unbelieving apostles, as contrasted with the rapture of devotion of the other three, and with the lowly submission and faith of Moses and Elias. Perhaps, too, the difference between the calm serenity of the mountain, and the hell-tortured misery of the plain—between the converse with the sainted perfected dead, and the converse with their unworthy successors—made Christ feel more sharply and poignantly than He ordinarily did His disciples' slowness of apprehension and want of faith. At any rate, it does strike one as remarkable that the only occasion on which there came from His lips anything that sounded like impatience and a momentary flash of indignation was, when in sharpest contrast with "This is my beloved Son: hear Him," He had to come down from the mountain to meet

Digitized by Google

the devil-possessed boy, the useless agony of the father, the sneering faces of the scribes, and the impotence of the disciples. Looking on all this, He turns to His followers—for it is to the apostles my text is spoken, and not to the crowd outside—with this most remarkable exclamation: "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?"

Now, I said these words at first sight looked almost like a momentary flash of indignation, as if for once a spot had come on His pallid cheek—a spot of anger—but I do not think it is so if we look a little more closely.

The first thing that seems to be in it is not anger, indeed, but a very distinct and very pathetic expression of Christ's infinite *pain*, because of man's faithlessness. The element of personal sorrow is most obvious here. It is not only that He is sad for their sakes that they are so unreceptive, and He can do so little for them—I shall have something to say about that presently—but that He feels for Himself, just as we do in our poor humble measure, the chilling effect of an atmosphere where there is no sympathy. All that ever the teachers and guides and leaders of the world have had to bear—all the misery of opening out their hearts in the frosty air of unbelief and rejection—Christ endured. All that men have ever felt—of how hard it is to keep on working when not a soul understands them, when not a single creature believes in them, when there is nobody that will accept their message, none that will give them credit for pure motives—Jesus Christ had to feel, and that in an altogether singular degree. There never was such a lonely soul on this earth as His, just because there never was another so pure and loving.

"The little hills rejoice *together*," as the Psalm says,

Digitized by Google

"on every side," but the great Alpine peak is alone there, away up amongst the cold and the snows—the solitary Christ, the uncomprehended Christ, the unaccepted Christ. Let us see in this one word how humanly, and yet how divinely, He felt the loneliness to which His love and purity condemned Him.

The Plain felt soul-chilling after the blessed communion of the Mountain. There was such a difference between Moses and Elias and the voice that said "This is my beloved Son: hear him;" and all the disbelief and slowness of spiritual apprehension of the people down below there; that no wonder that for once the pain that He generally kept absolutely down and silent, broke the bounds even of His restraint, and shaped for itself this pathetic utterance: "How long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?"

Oh, dear friends, here is "a little window through which we may see a great matter" if we will only think of how all that solitude, and all that sorrow of uncomprehended aims, was borne lovingly and patiently, right away on to the very end, for every one of us. I know that there are many of the aspects of Christ's life in which Christ's griefs tell more on the popular apprehension; but I do not know that there is one in which the title of "The man of sorrows" is to all deeper thinking more pathetically vindicated than in this—the solitude of the uncomprehended and the unaccepted Christ—His pain at His disciples' faithlessness.

And then do not let us forget that in this short sharp cry of anguish—for it is that—there may be detected by the listening ear not only the tone of personal hurt, but the tone of *disappointed* and thwarted *love*. Because of their unbelief He knew that they could not receive what

Digitized by Google

He desired to give them. We find Him more than once in His life hemmed in, hindered, balked of His purpose,—thwarted, as I say, in His design,—simply because there was nobody with a heart open to receive the rich treasure that He was ready to pour out. He had to keep it locked up in His own spirit, else it would have been wasted and spilled upon the ground. "He could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief;" and here He is standing in the midst of the men that knew Him best, that understood Him most, that were nearest to Him in sympathy; but even they were not ready for all this wealth of affection, all this infinitude of blessing with which His heart is charged. They offered no place to put it. They shut up the narrow cranny through which it might have come, and so He has to turn from them, bearing it away unbestowed. Like some man that goes out in the morning with his seed-basket full, and finds the whole field where he would fain have sown covered already with the springing weeds or burdened with the hard rock, and has to bring back the germs of possible life to bless and fertilize some other soil. Ah! "He that goeth forth weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with joy;" but He that comes back weeping, bearing the precious seed that He found no field to sow in, knows a deeper sadness, which has in it no prophecy of joy. It is wonderfully pathetic and beautiful, I think, to see how Jesus Christ knew the pains of wounded love that cannot get expressed because there is no heart to receive it.

Here I would remark, too, before I go to another point, that these two elements—that of personal sorrow and that of disappointed love and balked purposes—continue still, and are represented as in some measure

Digitized by Google

felt by Him now. It was to disciples that He said, "O faithless generation!" He did not mean to charge them with the entire absence of all confidence, but He did mean to declare that their poor, feeble faith, such as it was, was not worth naming in comparison with the abounding mass of their unbelief. There was one light spark in them, and there was also a great heap of green wood that had not caught the flame, and only smoked instead of blazing. And so He said to them, "O *faithless* generation!"

Ay, and if He came down here amongst us now, and went through the professing Christians in this land, to how many of us—regard being had to the feebleness of our confidence and the strength of our unbelief—He would have to say the same thing, "O faithless generation!"

The version of that clause in Matthew and Luke adds a significant word,—"faithless and *perverse* generation." The addition carries a grave lesson, as teaching us that the two are inseparably united; that the want of faith is morally a crime and sin; that unbelief is at once the most tragic manifestation of man's perverse will, and also in its turn the source of still more obstinate and wide-spreading evil. Blindness to His light, and rejection of His love, He treats as the very head and crown of evil. Like intertwining snakes, the loathly heads are separate; but the slimy convolutions are twisted indistinguishably together, and all unbelief has in it the nature of perversity—as all perversity has in it the nature of unbelief. "He will convince the world of sin, because they believe not on me."

May we venture to say, as we have already hinted, that all this pain is, in some mysterious way, still inflicted on

Digitized by Google

His loving heart? Can it be that every time we are guilty of unbelieving, unsympathetic rejection of His love, we send a pang of real pain and sorrow into the heart of Christ? It is a strange, solemn thought. There are many difficulties which start up, if we at all accept it. But still it does appear as if we could scarcely believe in His perpetual manhood, or think of His love as being in any real sense a human love, without believing that He sorrows when we sin; and that we can grieve, and wound, and cause to recoil upon itself, as it were, and close up that loving and gracious Spirit that delights in being met with answering love. If we may venture to take our love as in any measure analogous to His—and unless we do His love is to us a word without meaning—we may believe that it is so. Do not we know that the purer our love, and the more it has purified us, the more sensitive it becomes, even while the less suspicious it becomes? Is not the purest, most unselfish, highest love, that in which the least failure in response is felt most painfully? Though there be no anger, and no change in the Love, still there is a pang where there is an inadequate perception, or an unworthy reception, of it. And Scripture seems to countenance the belief that Divine Love, too, may know something, in some mysterious fashion, like that feeling, when it warns us, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption." So *we* may venture to say, Grieve not the Christ of God, who redeems us; and remember that we grieve Him most when we will not let Him pour His love upon us, but turn a sullen, unresponsive unbelief towards His pleading grace, as some glacier shuts out the sunshine from the mountain-side with its thick-ribbed ice.

Another thought, which seems to me to be expressed

Digitized by Google

in this wonderful exclamation of our Lord's, is—that *their faithlessness bound Christ to earth*, and kept Him here.

As there is not anger, but only pain, so there is also, I think, not exactly impatience, but a desire to depart, coupled with the feeling that He cannot leave them till they have grown stronger in faith. And that feeling is increased by the experience of their utter helplessness and shameful discomfiture during His brief absence. That had shown that they were not fit to be trusted alone. He had been away for a day up in the mountain there, and though they did not build an altar to any golden calf, like their ancestors, when their leader was absent, still when He comes back He finds things all gone wrong because of the few hours of His absence. What would they do if He were to go away from them altogether? They would never be able to stand it at all. It is impossible that He should leave them thus—raw, immature. The plant has not yet grown sufficiently strong to take away the prop round which it climbed. "How long must I be with you?" says the loving Teacher, who is prepared ungrudgingly to give His slow scholar as much time as he needs to learn his lesson. He is not impatient, but He desires to finish the task; and yet He is ready to let the scholar's dulness determine the duration of His stay. Surely that is wondrous and heart-touching love, that Christ should let their slowness measure the time during which He should linger here, and refrain from the glory which He desired. We do not know all the reasons which determined the length of our Lord's life upon earth, but this was one of them,—that He could not go away until He had left these men strong enough to stand by themselves, and to lay the foundations of the Church. Therefore He yielded to the plea of their very

Digitized by Google

faithlessness and backwardness, and with this wonderful word of condescension and appeal, bade them say for how many more days He must abide in the plain, and turn His back on the glories that had gleamed for a moment on the mountain of transfiguration.

In this connection, too, is it not striking to notice how long His short life and ministry appeared to our Lord Himself? There is to me something very pathetic in that question He addressed to one of His Apostles near the end of His pilgrimage. "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me?" It was not so very long—three years, perhaps, at the outside—and much less, if we take the shortest computation; and yet to Him it had been long. The days had seemed to go slowly. He longed that the fire which He came to fling on earth were already kindled, and the moments seemed to drop so slowly from the urn of time. But neither the holy longing to consummate His work by the mystery of His passion, to which more than one of His words bear witness, nor the not less holy longing to be glorified with the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, which we may reverently venture to suppose in Him, could be satisfied till His slow scholars were wiser, and His feeble followers stronger.

And then again, here we get a glimpse into the depth of Christ's *patient forbearance.* We might read these other words of our text, "How long shall I suffer you?" with such an intonation as to make them almost a threat that the limits of forbearance would soon be reached, and that He was not going to "suffer them" much longer. Some commentators speak of them as expressing "holy indignation," and I quite believe that there is such a thing, and that on other occasions it was

Digitized by Google

plainly spoken in Christ's words. But I fail to catch the tone of it here. To me this plaintive question has the very opposite of indignation in its ring. It sounds rather like a pledge that as long as they need forbearance they will get it; but, at the same time, a question of "How long that is to be?" It implies the inexhaustible riches and resources of His patient mercy. And oh, dear brethren, that endless forbearance is the only refuge and ground of hope we have. *His* perfect charity "is not soon angry; beareth all things," and never faileth. To it we have all to make the appeal—

> "Though I have most unthankful been
> Of all that e'er Thy grace received;
> Ten thousand times Thy goodness seen,
> Ten thousand times Thy goodness grieved;
> Yet, Lord, the chief of sinners spare."

And, thank God, we do not make our appeal in vain.

There is rebuke in His question, but how tender a rebuke it is! He rebukes without anger. Plainly He names the fault. He shows distinctly His sorrow, and does not hide the strain on His forbearance. That is His way of cure for His servants' faithlessness. It was His way on earth; it is His way in heaven. To us, too, comes the loving rebuke of this question, "How long shall I suffer you?"

Thank God that our answer may be cast into the words of His own promise: "I say not unto thee, until seven times; but until seventy times seven." Bear with me till Thou hast perfected me; and then bear me to Thyself, that I may be with Thee for ever, and grieve Thy love no more. So may it be, for with Him is plenteous redemption, and His forbearing "mercy endureth for ever."

Digitized by Google

VIII.

AN OLD DISCIPLE.

ACTS xxi. 16.

One Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we should lodge.

THERE is something that stimulates the imagination in these mere shadows of men that we meet in the New Testament story. What a strange fate that is to be made immortal by a line in this book—immortal and yet so unknown! We do not hear another word about this host of Paul's, but his name will be familiar to men's ears till the world's end. This figure is drawn in the slightest possible outline, with a couple of hasty strokes of the pencil. But if we take even these few bare words, and look at them, feeling that there is a man like ourselves sketched in them, I think we can get a real picture out of them, and that even this dim form crowded into the background of the apostolic story may have a word or two to say to us.

His name and his birthplace show that he belonged to the same class as Paul, that is, he was a Hellenist, or a Jew by descent, but born on Gentile soil, and speaking Greek. He comes from Cyprus, the native island of Barnabas, who may have been a friend of his. He was

Digitized by Google

an "old disciple," which does not mean simply that he was advanced in life, but that he was "a disciple from the beginning," one of the original group of believers. If we interpret the word strictly, we must suppose him to have been one of the rapidly diminishing nucleus, whc thirty years or more ago had seen Christ in the flesh, and been drawn to Him by His own words. Evidently the mention of the early date of his conversion suggests that the number of his contemporaries was becoming few, and that there was a certain honour and distinction conceded by the second generation of the Church to the survivors of the primitive band. Then, of course, as one of the earliest believers, he must, by this time, have been advanced in life. A Cypriote by birth, he had emigrated to, and resided in, Jerusalem; and there must have had means and heart to exercise a liberal hospitality. Though a Hellenist, like Paul, he does not seem to have known the Apostle before, for the most probable rendering of the context is, that the disciples from Cæsarea, who were travelling with the Apostle from that place to Jerusalem, "brought us to Mnason," implying that this was their first introduction to each other. But though probably unacquainted with the great teacher of the Gentiles—whose ways were looked on with much doubt by many of the Jerusalem Christians—the old man, relic of the original disciples as he was, had full sympathy with Paul, and opened his house and his heart to receive him. His adhesion to the Apostle would no doubt carry weight with "the many thousands of Jews which believed, and were all zealous of the law," and were as honourable to him as helpful to Paul.

Now if we put all this together, does not the shadowy figure begin to become more substantial? and does it not

Digitized by Google

preach to us some lessons that we may well take to heart?

The first thing which this old disciple says to us out of the misty distance is—*Hold fast to your early faith, and to the Christ whom you have known.*

Many a year had passed since the days when perhaps the beauty of the Master's own character and the sweetness of His own words had drawn this man to Him. How much had come and gone since then! Calvary and the Resurrection, Olivet and the Pentecost. His own life and mind had changed from buoyant youth to sober old age. His whole feelings and outlook on the world were different. His old friends had mostly gone. James indeed was still there, and Peter and John remained until this present, but most had fallen on sleep. A new generation was rising round about him, and new thoughts and ways were at work. But one thing remained for him what it had been in the old days, and that was Christ. "One generation cometh and another goeth, but the Christ abideth for ever."

> "We all are changed by still degrees;
> All but the basis of the soul."

And the "basis of the soul," in the truest sense, is that one God-laid foundation, on which whosoever buildeth shall never be confounded, nor ever need to change with changing time. Are we building there? and do we find that life, as it advances, but tightens our hold on Jesus Christ, who is our hope.

There is no fairer nor happier experience than that of the old man who has around him the old loves, the old confidences, and some measure of the old joys. But who can secure that blessed unity in his life, if he depend on

Digitized by Google

the love and help of even the dearest, or on the light of any creature for his sunshine? There is but one way of making all our days one, because one love, one hope, one joy, one aim binds them all together; and that is by taking the abiding Christ for ours, and abiding in Him all our days. Holding fast by the early convictions does not mean stiffening in them. There is plenty of room for advancement in Christ. No doubt Mnason, when he was first a disciple, knew but very little of the meaning and worth of his Master and His work, compared with what he had learned in all these years. And our true progress consists, not in growing away from Jesus, but in growing up into Him; not in passing through and leaving behind the first convictions of Him as Saviour; but in having these verified by the experience of years, deepened and cleared, unfolded and ordered into a larger, though still incomplete, whole. We may make our whole lives helpful to that advancement; and blessed shall we be, if the early faith is the faith that brightens till the end; and brightens the end. How beautiful it is to see a man, below whose feet time is crumbling away, holding firmly by the Lord whom he has loved and served all his days, and finding that the pillar of cloud, which guided him while he lived, begins to glow in its heart of fire as the shadows fall, and is a pillar of light to guide him when he comes to die. Dear friends, whether you be near the starting or near the prize of your Christian course, "cast not away your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward." See to it that the "knowledge of the Father," which is the "little children's" possession, passes through the "strength" of youth, and the "victory over the world," into the calm knowledge of Him "that is from the beginning," wherein the fathers find their

Digitized by Google

earliest convictions deepened and perfected. "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge" of Him, whom to know ever so imperfectly is eternal life; whom to know a little better, is the true progress for men; whom to know more and more fully is the growth, and gladness, and glory of the heavens. Look at this shadowy figure that looks out on us here, and listen to his far off voice, "exhorting us all that with purpose of heart we should cleave unto the Lord."

But there is another, and, as some might think, opposite lesson, to be gathered from this outline sketch, namely, *The welcome which we should be ready to give to new thoughts and ways.* It is evidently meant that we should note Mnason's position in the Church as significant in regard to his hospitable reception of the Apostle. You can fancy how the little knot of "original disciples" would be apt to value themselves on their position, especially as time went on, and their ranks were thinned. They would be tempted to suppose that they must needs understand the Master's meaning a great deal better than those who had never known Christ after the flesh; and no doubt they would be inclined to share in the suspicion with which the thorough-going Jewish party in the Church regarded this Paul, who had never seen the Lord. It would have been very natural for this good old man to have said—"I do not like these new-fangled ways. There was nothing of this sort in my younger days. Is it not likely that we, who were at the beginning of the Gospel, should understand the Gospel and the Church's work without this new man coming to set us right? I am too old to go in with these changes." All the more honourable is it that he should have been ready with an open house to shelter the great champion of the Gentile Churches; and, as we may reasonably believe, with an open

Digitized by Google

heart to welcome his teaching. Depend on it, it was not every old disciple that would have done as much.

Now, does not this flexibility of mind, and openness of nature to welcome new ways of work, when united with the persistent constancy in his old creed, make an admirable combination? It is one rare enough at any age, but especially in elderly men. We are always disposed to rend apart what ought never to be separated, the inflexible adherence to a fixed centre of belief, and the freest ranging around the whole changing circumference. The man of strong convictions is apt to grip every trifle of practice and every unimportant bit of his creed with the same tenacity with which he holds its vital heart, and to mistake obstinacy for firmness, and dogged self-will for faithfulness to truth. The man who welcomes new light, and reaches forward to greet new ways, is apt to delight in having much fluid that ought to be fixed, and to value himself on a "liberality" which simply means that he has no central truth and no rooted convictions. And as men get older they stiffen more and more, and have to leave the new work for new hands, and the new thoughts for new brains. That is all in the order of nature, but so much the finer is it when we do see old Christian men who join to their firm grip of the old Gospel the power of welcoming, and at least bidding God speed, to new thoughts and new workers, and new ways of work.

The union of these two characteristics should be consciously aimed at by us all. Hold unchanging, with a grasp that nothing can relax, by Christ, our life and our all; but with that tenacity of mind, try to cultivate flexibility too. Love the old, but be ready to welcome the new. Do not consecrate your own or other people's habits of thought or forms of work with the same sanctity

Digitized by Google

which belongs to the central truths of our salvation; do not let the willingness to entertain new light lead you to tolerate any changes there. It is hard to blend the two virtues together, but they are meant to be complements, not opposites, to each other. The fluttering leaves and bending branches need a firm stem and deep roots. The firm stem looks noblest in its unmoved strength when it is contrasted with a cloud of light foliage dancing in the wind. Try to imitate the persistency and the open mind of that "old disciple" who was so ready to welcome and entertain the Apostle of the Gentile Churches.

But there is still another lesson which, I think, this portrait may suggest, and that is, the *beauty that may dwell in an obscure life.* There is nothing to be said about this old man but that he was a disciple. He had done no great thing for his Lord. No teacher or preacher was he. No eloquence or genius was in him. No great heroic deed, or piece of saintly endurance, is to be recorded of him, but only this, that he had loved and followed Christ all his days. And is not that record enough? It is a blessed fate to live for ever in the world's memory, with only that one word attached to his name—a disciple.

The world may remember very little about us a year after we are gone. No thought, no deed may be connected with our names beyond some narrow circle of loving hearts. There may be no place for us in any record written with a man's pen. But what does that matter if our names, dear friends, are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, with this for sole epitaph, "a disciple"? That single phrase is the noblest summary of a life. A thinker? a hero? a great man? a millionnaire? no, "a disciple." That says all. May it be your epitaph and mine!

Digitized by Google

What he could do he did. It was not his vocation to go into the regions beyond, like Paul; to guide the Church, like James; to put his remembrances of his Master in a book, like Matthew; to die for Jesus, like Stephen. But he could open his house for Paul and his company, and so take his share in their work. "He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward." He that with understanding and sympathy welcomes and sustains the prophet, shows thereby that he stands on the same spiritual level, and has the makings of a prophet in him, though he want the intellectual force and may never open his lips to speak the burden of the Lord. Therefore, he shall be one in reward as he is in spirit. The old law in Israel is the law for the warfare of Christ's soldiers. "As his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that abideth by the stuff: they shall part alike." The men in the rear who guard the camp, and keep the communications open, may deserve honours, and crosses, and prize-money as much as their comrades who led the charge that cut through the enemy's line and scattered their ranks. It does not matter, so far as the real spiritual worth of the act is concerned, what we do, but only why we do it. All deeds are the same which are done from the same motive and with the same devotion; and He who judges not by our outward actions, but by the springs from which they come, will bracket together as equals at last many who were widely separated here in the form of their service, and the apparent magnitude of their work.

"She hath done what she could." Her power determined the measure and the manner of her work. One precious thing she had, and only one, and she broke her one rich possession that she might pour the fragrant oil

Digitized by Google

over His feet. Therefore, her useless deed of utter love and uncalculating self-sacrifice is crowned by praise from His lips, whose praise is our highest honour, and the world is still "filled with the odour of that ointment."

So this old disciple's hospitality is strangely made immortal, and the record of it reminds us that the smallest service done for Jesus is remembered and treasured by Him. Men have spent their lives to win a line in the world's chronicles which are written on sand, and have broken their hearts because they failed; and this passing act of one obscure Christian, in sheltering a little company of travel-stained wayfarers, has made his name a possession for ever. "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not;"—but let us fill our little corners, doing our unnoticed work for the love of our Lord, careless about man's remembrance or praise, because sure of Christ's, whose praise is the only fame, whose remembrance is the highest reward. "God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love."

Digitized by Google

IX.

"THE HANDS OF THE MIGHTY GOD OF JACOB."

GENESIS xlix. 23, 24.

The archers shot at him, but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty *God* of Jacob.

THESE picturesque words are part of what purports to be one of the oldest pieces of poetry in the Bible—the dying Jacob's prophetic blessing on his sons. Of these sons, there are two over whom his heart seems especially to pour itself—Judah the ancestor of the royal tribe, and Joseph. The future fortunes of their descendants are painted in most glowing colours. And of these two, the blessing on the "Son who was dead and is alive again, who was lost and is found," is the fuller of tender desire and glad prediction. The words of our text are probably to be taken as prophecy, not as history—as referring to the future conflicts and victories of the tribe, not to the past trials and triumphs of its father. But be that as it may, they contain, in most vivid metaphor, the earliest utterance of a very familiar truth. They are the first hint of that thought which is caught up and expanded in many a later saying of psalmist, and prophet, and apostle. We hear their echoes in the great song which David spake

Digitized by Google

"in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul." "He teacheth my hands to war, so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms;" and the idea receives its fullest carrying out and noblest setting forth in the trumpet-call of the apostle, who had seen more formidable weapons and a more terrible military discipline in Rome's legions than Jacob knew, and who pressed them into his stimulating call: "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might." "Put on the whole armour of God." Strength for conflict by contact with the strength of God is the common thought of all these passages—a very common thought, which may perhaps be freshened for us by the singular intensity with which this metaphor of our text presents it. Look at the picture.—Here stands the solitary man, ringed all round by enemies full of bitter hate. Their arrows are on the string, their bows drawn to the ear. The shafts fly thick, and when they have whizzed past him, and he can be seen again, he stands unharmed, grasping his unbroken bow. The assault has shivered no weapon, has given no wound. He has been able to stand in the evil day—and look! a pair of great gentle strong hands are laid upon his hands and arms, and strength passes into his feebleness from the touch of the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. So the enemy have two, not one, to reckon with. By the side of the hunted man stands a mighty figure, and it is His strength, not the mortal's impotence, that has to be overcome. Some dream of such Divine help in the struggle of battle has floated through the minds and been enshrined in the legends of many people, as when the panoplied Athene has been descried leading the Grecian armies, or, through the dust of conflict, the gleaming armour and white horses of the Twin Brethren far in ad-

Digitized by Google

vance of the armies of Rome. But the dream is for us a reality. It *is* true that we go not to warfare at our own charges, nor by our own strength. If we love Him and try to make a brave stand against our own evil, and to strike a manful blow for God in this world, we shall not have to bear the brunt alone. Remember he who fights for God never fights without God.

There is a strange story in a later book of Scripture, which almost reads as if it had been modelled on some reminiscence of these words of the dying Jacob—and is, at any rate, a remarkable illustration of them. The kingdom of Israel, of which the descendants of Joseph were the most conspicuous part, was in the very crisis and agony of one of its Syrian wars. Its principal human helper was "fallen sick of the sickness whereof he died." And to his death-bed came, in a passion of perplexity and despair, the irresolute weakling who was then king, bewailing the impending withdrawal of the nation's best defence. The dying Elisha, with curt authority, pays no heed to the tears of Joash, but bids him take bow and arrows. "And he said to the king of Israel, Put thine hand upon the bow," and he put his hand upon it; and "*Elisha put his hands upon the king's hands.*" Then, when the thin, wasted, transparent fingers of the old man were thus laid guiding and infusing strength, by a strange paradox, into the brown, muscular hands of the young king, he bids him open the casement that looked eastward towards the lands of the enemy, and, as the blinding sunshine and the warm air streamed into the sick-chamber, he bade him draw the bow. He was obeyed, and, as the arrow whizzed Jordanwards, the dying prophet followed its flight with words brief and rapid like it, "the arrow of the Lord's deliverance." Here we have all the elements of our text singularly repeated,—

Digitized by Google

the dying seer, the king the representative of Joseph in the royal dignity to which his descendants have come, the arrows and the bow, the strength for conflict by the touch of hands that had the strength of God in them. The lesson of that paradox that the dying gave strength to the living, the feeble to the strong, was the old one which is ever new, that the mere human power is weakness when it is strongest, and that power drawn from God is omnipotent when it seems weakest. And the further lesson is the lesson of our text, that our hands are then strengthened when His hands are laid upon them, of whom it is written: "Thou hast a mighty arm: strong is Thy hand, and high is Thy right hand."

As a father in old days might have taken his little boy out to the butts, and put a bow into his hand, and given him his first lesson in archery, directing his unsteady aim by his own firmer finger, and lending the strength of his wrist to his child's feebler pull, so God does with us. The sure strong hand is laid on ours, and is "profitable to direct." A wisdom not our own is ever at our side, and ready for our service. We but dimly perceive the conditions of the conflict, and the mark at which we should aim is ever apt to be obscured to our perceptions. But in all cases where conscience is perplexed, or where the judgment is at fault, we may, if we will, have Him for our teacher. And when we know not where to strike the foes that seem invulnerable, like the warrior who was dipped in the magic stream, or clothed in mail impenetrable as rhinoceros' hide, He will make us wise to know the one spot where a wound is fatal. We shall not need to fight as one that beats the air; to strike at random; or to draw our bow at a venture, if we will let Him guide us.

Or if ever the work be seen clearly enough, but our

Digitized by Google

poor hands cannot take aim for very trembling, or shoot for fear of striking something very dear to us, He will steady our nerves and make our aim sure and true. We have often, in our fight with ourselves, and in our struggle to get God's will done in the world, to face as cruel a perplexity as the father who had to split the apple on his son's head. The evil against which we have to contend is often so closely connected with things very precious to us, that it is hard to smite the one when there is such danger of grazing the other. Many a time our tastes, our likings, our prejudices, our hopes, our loves, make our sight dim, and our pulses too tumultuous to allow of a good long steady gaze and a certain aim. It is hard to keep the arrow point firm when the heart throbs and the hand shakes. But in all such difficult times He is ready to help us. "Behold, we know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee," is a prayer never offered in vain.

The word that is here rendered "made strong," might be translated "made pliable," or "flexible," conveying the notion of deftness and dexterity rather than that of simple strength. It is practised strength that He will give, the educated hand and arm, master of all the manipulation of the weapon. The stiffness and clumsiness of our handling, the obstinate rigidity as well as the throbbing feebleness of our arms, the dimness of our sight, may all be overcome. At His touch the raw recruit is as the disciplined veteran; the prophet who cannot speak because he is a child, gifted with a mouth and wisdom which all the adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor to resist. Do not be disheartened by your inexperience, or by your ignorance; but as the prophet said to the young king, Take the bow and shoot. God's strong hand will hold yours, and the arrow will fly true.

Digitized by Google

The strong hand is laid on ours, and lends its weight to our feeble pull. The bow is often too heavy for us to bend, but we do not need to strain our strength in the vain attempt to do it alone. Tasks seem too much for us. The pressure of our daily work overwhelms us. The burden of our daily anxieties and sorrows is too much. Some huge obstacle starts up in our path. Some great sacrifice for truth, honour, duty, which we feel we cannot make, is demanded of us. Some daring defiance of some evil, which has caught us in its toils, or which it is unfashionable to fight against, seems laid upon us. We cannot rise to the height of the occasion, or bring ourselves to the wrench that is required. Or the wearing recurrence of monotonous duties seems to take all freshness out of our lives, and all spring out of ourselves; and we are ready to give over struggling any more, and let ourselves drift. Can we not feel that large hand laid on ours; and does not power, more and other than our own, creep into our numb and relaxed fingers? Yes, if we will let Him. His strength is made perfect in our weakness; and every man and woman who will make life a noble struggle against evil, vanity, or sin, may be very sure that God will direct and strengthen their hands to war, and their fingers to fight.

But the remarkable metaphor of the text not only gives the fact of Divine strength being bestowed, but also the *manner* of the gift. What a boldness of reverent familiarity there is in that symbol of the hands of God laid on the hands of the man! How strongly it puts the contact between us and Him as the condition of our reception of power from Him! A true touch, as of hand to hand, conveys the grace. It is as when the prophet laid himself down with his warm lip on the dead boy's

Digitized by Google

cold mouth, and his heart beating against the still heart of the corpse, till the life passed into the clay, and the lad lived. So, if we may say it, our Quickener bends Himself over all our deadness, and by His own warmth re-animates us.

Perhaps this same thought is one of the lessons which we are meant to learn from the frequency with which our Lord wrought His miracles of healing by the touch of His hand. "Come and lay Thy hand on him, and he shall live." "And He put forth His hand and touched him, and said, I will, be thou clean." "Many said, He is dead; but Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose." The touch of His hand is healing and life. The touch of our hands is faith. In the mystery of His incarnation, in the flow of His sympathy, in the forth-putting of His power, He lays hold not on angels, but He lays hold on the seed of Abraham. By our lowly trust, by the forth-putting of our desires, we stretch "lame hands of faith," and, blessed be God! we do not "grope," but we grasp His strong hand and are held up.

The contact of our spirits with His Spirit is a contact far more real than the touch of earthly hands that grasp each other closest. There is ever some film of atmosphere between the palms. But "he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit," and he that clasps Christ's outstretched hand of help with his outstretched hand of weakness, holds Him with a closeness to which all unions of earth are gaping gulfs of separation. You remember how Mary cast herself at Christ's feet on the resurrection morning, and would have flung her arms round them in the passion of her joy. The calm word which checked her has a wonderful promise in it. "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father;" plainly leading

Digitized by Google

to the inference, "When I am ascended, then you may touch Me." And that touch will be more reverent, more close, more blessed, than any clasping of His feet, even with such loving hands, and will be possible for us all for evermore.

Nothing but such contact will give us strength for conflict and for conquest. And the plain lesson therefore is—see to it, that the contact is not broken by you. Put away the metaphor, and the simple English of the advice is just this:—First, live in the desire and the confidence of His help in all our need, of His strength as all our power. As a part of that confidence—its reverse and under side, so to speak—cherish the profound sense of your own weakness.

> "In our own strength we nothing can;
> Full soon were we down-ridden"—

as Luther has taught us to sing. Let there be a constant renewal, in the midst of our duties and trials, of that conscious dependence and feeling of insufficiency. Stretch out the empty hands to Him in that desire and hope, which, spoken or silent, is prayer. Keep the communications open, by which His strength flows into your souls. Let them not be choked with self-confidence, with vanities, with the rubbish of your own nature, or of the world. Do not twitch away your hands from under the strong hands that are laid so gently upon them. But let Him cover, direct, cherish, and strengthen your poor fingers till they are strong and nimble for all your work and warfare. If you go into the fight trusting to your own wit and wisdom, to the vigour of your own arm, or the courage of your own heart, that very fool-hardy confidence is itself defeat, for it is sin as well as folly, and

Digitized by Google

nothing can come of it but utter collapse and disaster. But if you will only go to your daily fight with yourself and the world, with your hand grasping God's hand, you will be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. The enemies may compass you about like bees, but in the name of the Lord you can destroy. Their arrows may fly thick enough to darken the sun, but, as the proud old boast has it, "then we can fight in the shade;" and when their harmless points have buried themselves in the ground, you will stand unhurt, your unshivered bow ready for the next assault, and your hands made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. "In all these things we are more than conquerors, through Him that loved us."

Digitized by Google

X.

THE SHEPHERD, THE STONE OF ISRAEL.

GENESIS xlix. 24.

. . . The Mighty God of Jacob. From thence *is* the Shepherd, the stone of Israel.

A SLIGHT alteration in the rendering will probably bring out the meaning of these words more correctly. The last two clauses should perhaps not be read as a separate sentence. Striking out the supplement "is," and letting the previous sentence run on to the end of the verse, we get a series of names of God, in apposition with each other, as the sources of the strength promised to the arms of the hands of the warlike sons of Joseph. From the hands of the mighty God of Jacob—from thence, from the Shepherd, the stone of Israel—the power will come for conflict and for conquest. This exuberant heaping together of names of God is the mark of the flash of rapturous confidence which lit up the dying man's thoughts when they turned to God. When he begins to think of Him he cannot stay his tongue. So many aspects of His character, so many remembrances of His deeds, come crowding into his mind; so familiar and so dear are they, that he must linger over the words, and strive by this triple repetition to express the manifold

Digitized by Google

preciousness of Him whom no name, nor crowd of names, can rightly praise. So earthly love ever does with its earthly objects, inventing and reiterating epithets which are caresses. Such repetitions are not tautologies, for each utters some new aspect of the one subject, and comes from a new gush of heart's love towards it. And something of the same rapture and unwearied recurrence to the Name that is above every name should mark the communion of devout souls with their heavenly Love. What a wonderful burst of such praise flowed out from David's thankful heart, in his day of deliverance, like some strong current, with its sevenfold wave, each crested with the Name! "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer: my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower."

These three names which we find here are striking and beautiful in themselves; in their juxtaposition; in their use on Jacob's lips. They seem to have been all coined by him, for, if we accept this song as a true prophecy uttered by him, we have here the earliest instance of their occurrence. They have all a history, and appear again expanded and deepened in the subsequent Revelation. Let us look at them as they stand.

1. *The Mighty God of Jacob.* The meaning of such a name is clear enough. It is He who has shown Himself mighty and mine by His deeds for me all through my life. The dying man's thoughts are busy with all that past from the day when he went forth from the tent of Isaac, and took of the stones of the field for his pillow when the sun went down. A perplexed history it had been, with many a bitter sorrow, and many a yet bitterer sin. Passionate grief and despairing murmurs he had felt and

Digitized by Google

flung out, while it slowly unfolded itself. When the Pharaoh had asked, "how old art thou?" he had answered in words which owe their sombreness partly to obsequious assumption of insignificance in such a presence, but have a strong tinge of genuine sadness in them too: "Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been." But lying dying there, with it all well behind him, he has become wiser; and now it all looks to him as one long showing forth of the might of his God, who had been with him all his life long, and had redeemed him from all evil. He has got far enough away to see the lie of the land, as he could not do while he was toiling along the road. The barren rocks and white snow glow with purple as the setting sun touches them. The struggles with Laban; the fear of Esau; the weary work of toilsome years; the sad day when Rachel died, and left him the "son of her sorrow;" the heart sickness of the long years of Joseph's loss —all have faded away, or been changed into thankful wonder at God's guidance. The one thought which the dying man carries out of life with him is: God has shown Himself mighty, and He has shown Himself mine.

For each of us, our own experience should be a revelation of God. The things about Him which we read in the Bible are never living and real to us till we have verified them in the facts of our own history. Many a word lies on the page, or in our memories, fully believed and utterly shadowy, until in some soul's conflict we have had to grasp it, and found it true. Only so much of our creed as we have proved in life is really ours. If we will only open our eyes and reflect upon our history as it passes before us, we shall find every corner of it filled with the manifestations to our hearts and to our minds of a present God. But our folly, our stupidity, our im-

Digitized by Google

patience, our absorption with the mere outsides of things, our selfwill, blind us to the Angel with the drawn sword who resists us, as well as to the Angel with the lily who would lead us. So we waste our days; are deaf to His voice speaking through all the clatter of tongues, and blind to His bright presence shining through all the dimness of earth; and, for far too many of us, we never can see God in the present, but only discern Him when He has passed by, like Moses from his cleft. Like this same Jacob, we have to say: "Surely God was in this place, and I knew it not." Hence we miss the educational worth of our lives; are tortured with needless cares; are beaten by the poorest adversaries; and grope amidst what seems to us a chaos of pathless perplexities, when we might be marching on assured and strong, with God for our guide, and the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob for our defence.

Notice, too, how distinctly the thought comes out in this name,—that the very vital centre of a man's religion is his conviction that God is his. He will not be content with thinking of God as the God of his fathers; he will not even be content with associating himself with them in the common possession; but he must feel the full force of the intensely personal bond that knits him to God, and God to him. Of course such a feeling does not ignore the blessed fellowship and family who also are held in this bond. The God of Jacob is to the patriarch also the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. But that comes second, and this comes first. Each man for himself must put forth the hand of his own faith, and grasp that great hand for his own guide. "*My* Lord and *my* God" is the true form of the confession. "He loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*," is the shape in which the Gospel of

Digitized by Google

Christ melts the soul. God is mine because His love individualizes me, and I have a distinct place in His heart, His purposes, and His deeds. God is mine, because by my own individual act—the most personal which I can perform—I cast myself on Him; by my faith appropriate the common salvation; and open my being to the inflow of His power. God is mine, and I am His, in that wonderful mutual possession, with perpetual interchange of giving and receiving not only gifts but selves, which makes the very life of love, whether it be love on earth or love in heaven.

Remember, too, the profound use which our Lord made of this name wherein the man claims to possess God. Because Moses at the bush called God, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, they cannot have ceased to be. The personal relations which subsist between God and the soul that clasps Him for its own demand an immortal life for their adequate expression, and make it impossible that death's skeleton fingers should have power to untie such a bond. Anything is conceivable, rather than that the soul which can say "God is mine" should perish. And that continued existence demands, too, a state of being which shall correspond to itself, in which its powers shall all be exercised, its desires fulfilled, its possibilities made facts. Therefore there must be "the resurrection." "God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city."

The dying patriarch left to his descendants the legacy of this great name, and often, in later times, it was used to quicken faith by the remembrance of the great deeds of God in the past. One instance may serve as a sample of the whole. "The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God

Digitized by Google

of Jacob is our refuge." The first of these two names lays the foundation of our confidence in the thought of the boundless power of Him whom all the forces of the universe, personal and impersonal, angels and stars, in their marshalled order, obey and serve. The second bids later generations claim as theirs all that the old history reveals as having belonged to the "world's grey fathers." They had no special prerogative of nearness or of possession. The arm that guided them is unwearied, and all the past is true still, and will for evermore be true for all who love God. So the venerable name is full of promise and of hope for us: "the God of Jacob is our refuge."

2. *The Shepherd.* How that name sums up the lessons that Jacob had learned from the work of himself and of his sons! "Thy servants are shepherds," they said to Pharaoh; "both we, and also our sons." For fourteen long weary years he had toiled at that task. "In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes." And his own sleepless vigilance and patient endurance seem to him to be but shadows of the loving care, the watchful protection, the strong defence, which "the God, who has been my Shepherd all my life long," had extended to him and his. Long before the shepherd king, who had been taken from the sheepcotes to rule over Israel, sang his immortal psalm, the same occupation had suggested the same thought to the shepherd patriarch. Happy they whose daily work may picture for them some aspect of God's care—or rather, happy they whose eyes are open to see the dim likeness of God's care which every man's earthly relations, and some part of his work, most certainly present.

There can be no need to draw out at length the

Digitized by Google

thoughts which that sweet and familiar emblem has conveyed to so many generations. Loving care, wise guidance, fitting food, are promised by it; and docile submission, close following at the Shepherd's heels, patience, innocence, meekness, trust, are required. But I may put emphasis for a moment on the connection between the thought of "the mighty God of Jacob" and that of "the Shepherd." The occupation, as we see it, does not call for a strong arm, or much courage, except now and then to wade through snow-drifts, and dig out the buried and half-dead creatures. But the shepherds whom Jacob knew, had to be hardy, bold fighters. There were marauders lurking ready to sweep away a weakly guarded flock. There were wild beasts in the gorges of the hills. There was danger in the sun by day on these burning plains, and in the night the wolves prowled round the flock. We remember how David's earliest exploits were against the lion and the bear, and how he felt that even his duel with the Philistine bully was not more formidable than these had been. If we will read into our English notions of a shepherd this element of danger and of daring, we shall feel that these two clauses are not to be taken as giving the contrasted ideas of strength and gentleness, but the connected ones of strength, and therefore protection and security. We have the same connection in later echoes of this name. "Behold, the Lord God shall come with *strong* hand; He shall feed His flock like a shepherd." And our Lord's use of the figure brings into all but exclusive prominence the good shepherd's conflict with the ravening wolves—a conflict in which he must not hesitate even "to lay down his life for the sheep." As long as the flock are here, amidst dangers, and foes, and wild weather, the arm that guides must be

Digitized by Google

an arm that guards; and none less mighty than the Mighty One of Jacob can be the Shepherd of men. But a higher fulfilment yet awaits this venerable emblem, when in other pastures, where no lion nor any ravening beast shall come, the "Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne," and is Shepherd as well as Lamb, "shall feed them, and lead them by living fountains of waters."

3. *The Stone of Israel.* Here, again, we have a name, that after-ages have caught up and cherished, used for the first time. I suppose the Stone of Israel means much the same thing as the Rock. If so, that symbol, too, which is full of such large meanings, was coined by Jacob. It is, perhaps, not fanciful to suppose that it owes its origin to the scenery of Palestine. The wild cliffs of the eastern region where Peniel lay, or the savage fastnesses in the southern wilderness, a day's march from Hebron, where he lived so long, came back to his memory amid the flat, clay land of Egypt; and their towering height, their immovable firmness, their cool shade, their safe shelter, spoke to him of the unalterable might and impregnable defence which he had found in God. So there is in this name the same devout, reflective laying-hold upon experience which we have observed in the preceding.

There is also the same individualizing grasp of God as his very own; for "Israel" here is, of course, to be taken not as the name of the nation but as his own name, and the intention of the phrase is evidently to express what God had been to him personally.

The general idea of this symbol is perhaps firmness, solidity. And that general idea may be followed out in various details. God is a rock for a foundation. Build your lives, your thoughts, your efforts, your hopes there. The

Digitized by Google

house founded on the rock will stand though wind and rain from above smite it, and floods from beneath beat on it like battering-rams. God is a rock for a fortress. Flee to Him to hide, and your defence shall be the "munitions of rocks," which shall laugh to scorn all assault, and never be stormed by any foe. God is a rock for shade and refreshment. Come close to Him from out of the scorching heat, and you will find coolness and verdure and moisture in the clefts, when all outside that grateful shadow is parched and dry.

The word of the dying Jacob was caught up by the great law-giver in his dying song. "Ascribe ye greatness to our God. He is the Rock." It reappears in the last words of the shepherd king, whose grand prophetic picture of the true King is heralded by "The Rock of Israel spake to me. It is heard once more from the lips of the greatest of the prophets in his glowing prophecy of the song of the final days: "Trust ye in the Lord for ever; for in the Lord Jehovah is the Rock of Ages," as well as in his solemn prophecy of the Stone which God would lay in Zion. We hear it again from the lips that cannot lie. "Did ye never read in the Scriptures, The Stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head-stone of the corner?" And for the last time the venerable metaphor which has cheered so many ages appears in the words of that Apostle who was "surnamed Cephas, which is by interpretation a stone." "To whom coming as unto a living stone, ye also as living stones are built up." As on some rocky site in Palestine, where a thousand generations in succession have made their fortresses, one may see stones laid with the bevel that tells of early Jewish masonry, and above them Roman work, and higher still masonry of crusading times, and above it the building of

Digitized by Google

to-day; so we, each age in our turn, build on this great rock foundation, dwell safe there for our little lives, and are laid to peaceful rest in a sepulchre in the rock. On Christ we may build. In Him we may dwell and rest secure. We may die in Jesus, and be gathered to our own people, who, having died, live in Him. And though so many generations have reared their dwellings on that great rock, there is ample room for us too to build. We have not to content ourselves with an uncertain foundation among the shifting rubbish of perished dwellings, but can get down to the firm virgin rock for ourselves. None that ever builded there have been confounded. We clasp hands with all who have gone before us. At one end of the long chain this dim figure of the dying Jacob, amid the strange vanished life of Egypt, stretches out his withered hands to God the stone of Israel; at the other end, we lift up ours to Jesus, and cry:

> "Rock of Ages! cleft for me,
> Let me hide myself in Thee."

The faith is one. One will be the answer and the reward. May it be yours and mine!

Digitized by Google

XI.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

JOHN viii. 12.

I am the Light of the World. He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of Life.

JESUS CHRIST was His own great theme. Whatever be the explanation of the fact, there stands the fact, that, if we know anything at all about his habitual tone of teaching, we know that it was full of Himself. We know, too, that what He said about Himself was very unlike the language becoming a wise and humble religious teacher. Both the prominence given to His own personality, and the tremendous claims He advances for Himself, are hard to reconcile with any conception of His nature and work except one,—that there we have God manifest in the flesh. Are such words as these fit to be spoken by any man conscious of his own limitations and imperfections of life and knowledge? Would they not be fatal to anybody's pretensions to be a teacher of religion or morality? They assert that the speaker is the source of illumination for the whole world; the only source; the source for all. They assert that "following" Him, whether in belief or in deed, is the sure deliverance from all darkness, either of error or of sin; and implants in every

Digitized by Google

follower a light which is life! And the world, instead of turning away. from such monstrous assumptions, and drowning them in scornful laughter, or rebelling against them, has listened, and largely believed, and has not felt them to mar the beauty of meekness, which, by a strange anomaly, this Man says he has.

Words parallel to these are frequent on our Lord's lips. In each instance they have some special appropriateness of application, as is probably the case here. The suggestion has been reasonably made, that there is an allusion in them to part of the ceremonial connected with the Feast of Tabernacles, at which we find our Lord present in the previous chapter. Commentators tell us that on the first evening of the feast, two huge golden lamps, which stood one on each side of the altar of burnt offering in the temple court, were lighted as the night began to fall, and poured out a brilliant flood over temple, and city, and deep gorge; while far into the midnight, troops of rejoicing worshippers clustered about them with dance and song. The possibility of this reference is strengthened by the note of place which our Evangelist gives. "These things spake Jesus in the treasury, as He taught in the temple," for the "treasury" stood in the same court, and doubtless the golden lamps were full in sight of the listening groups. It is also strengthened by the unmistakeable allusion in the previous chapter to another portion of the ceremonial of the feast, where our Lord puts forth another of His great self-revelations and demands, in singular parallelism with that of our text, in the words: "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink." That refers to the custom during the feast of drawing water from the fountain of Siloam, which was poured out on the altar, while the gathered multitude chanted the

Digitized by Google

old strain of Isaiah's prophecy: "With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation." It is to be remembered, too, in estimating the probability of our text belonging to these temple-sayings at the feast, that the section which separates it from them, and contains the story about the woman taken in adultery, is judged by the best critics to be out of place here, and is not found in the most valuable manuscripts. If, then, we suppose this allusion to be fairly probable, I think it gives a special direction and meaning to these grand words, which it may be worth while to think of briefly.

The first thing to notice is—the intention of the ceremonial which our Lord here points to as a symbol of Himself. What was the meaning of these great lights that went flashing through the warm autumn nights of the festival? All the parts of that feast were intended to recall some feature of the forty years' wanderings in the wilderness; the lights by the altar were memorials of the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. When, then, Jesus says, "I am the Light of the world," He would declare Himself as being in reality, and to every soul of man to the end of time, what that cloud with its heart of fire was in outward seeming to one generation of desert wanderers.

Now, the main thing which *it* was to these, was the *visible vehicle of the Divine presence.* "The Lord went before them in a pillar of a cloud." "The Lord looked through the pillar." "The Lord came down in the cloud and spake with him." The "cloud covered the tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord appeared." Such is the way in which it is ever spoken of, as being the manifestation to Israel in sensible form of the presence among them of God their King. "The glory of the Lord" has

Digitized by Google

a very specific meaning in the Old Testament. It usually signifies that brightness, the flaming heart of the cloudy pillar, which for the most part, as it would appear, veiled by the cloud, gathered radiance as the world grew darker at set of sun; and sometimes, at great crises in the history, as at the Red Sea, or on Sinai, or in loving communion with the law-giver, or in swift judgment against the rebels, rent the veil and flamed on men's eyes. I need not remind you how this same pillar of cloud and fire, which at once manifested and hid God, was thereby no unworthy symbol of Him who remains, after all revelation, unrevealed. Whatsoever sets forth, must also shroud the infinite glory. Concerning all by which He makes Himself known to eye, or mind, or heart, it must be said: "And there was the hiding of His power." The fire is ever folded in the cloud. Nay, at bottom, the light which is full of glory is therefore inaccessible. And the thick darkness in which He dwells is but the "glorious privacy" of perfect light.

That guiding pillar, which moved before the moving people—a cloud to shelter from the scorching heat, a fire to cheer in the blackness of night—spread itself above the sanctuary of the wilderness; and "the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." When the moving tabernacle gave place to the fixed temple, again "*the* cloud filled the house of the Lord;" and there,—dwelling between the cherubim, the types of the whole order of creatural life; and above the mercy-seat, that spoke of pardon; and the ark that held the law; and behind the veil, in the thick darkness of the holy of holies, where no feet trod, save once a year one white-robed priest, in the garb of a penitent, and bearing the blood that made atonement,—shone

Digitized by Google

the light of the glory of God, the visible majesty of the present Deity.

But long centuries had passed since that light had departed. "The glory" had ceased from the house that now stood on Zion, and the light from between the cherubim. Shall we not, then, see a deep meaning and reference to that awful blank, when Jesus standing there in the courts of that temple, whose inmost shrine was, in a most sad sense, empty, pointed to the quenched lamps that commemorated a departed Shechinah, and said, "I am the Light of the world."

He is the Light of the world, because in Him is the glory of God. His words are madness, and something very like blasphemy, unless they are vindicated by the visible indwelling in Him of the present God. The cloud of the humanity, "the veil, that is to say, His flesh," enfolds and tempers; and through its transparent folds reveals, even while it swathes, the Godhead. Like some fleecy vapour flitting across the sun, and irradiated by its light, it enables our weak eyes to see light, and not darkness, in the else intolerable blaze. Yes! Thou art the Light of the world, because in Thee dwelleth the fulness of the Godhead bodily. Thy servant hath taught us the meaning of Thy words, when he said: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us; and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Then, subordinate to this principal thought, is the other on which I may touch for a moment—that Christ, like that pillar of cloud and fire, *guides us* in our pilgrimage. You may remember how emphatically the Book of Numbers (chap. ix.) dwells upon the absolute control of all the marches and halts by the movements of the cloud.

Digitized by Google

When it was taken up, they journeyed; when it settled down, they encamped. As long as it lay spread above the tabernacle, there they stayed. Impatient eyes might look, and impatient spirits chafe—no matter. The camp might be pitched in a desolate place, away from wells and palm-trees, away from shade, among fiery serpents, and open to fierce foes—no matter. As long as it was motionless no man stirred. Weary slow days might pass in this compulsory inactivity; but "whether it were two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried upon the tabernacle, the children of Israel journeyed not." And whenever it lifted itself up,—no matter how short had been the halt, how weary and footsore the people, how pleasant the resting-place,—up with the tent-pegs immediately, and away. If the signal were given at midnight, when all but the watchers slept, or at mid-day, it was all the same. There was the true Commander of their march. It was not Moses, nor Jethro, with his quick Arab eye and knowledge of the ground, that guided them; but that stately, solemn pillar, that floated before them. How they must have watched for the gathering up of its folds as they lay softly stretched along the tabernacle roof! and for its sinking down, and spreading itself out, like a misty hand of blessing, as it sailed in the van.

"I am the Light of the world." We have in Him a better guide through worse perplexities than theirs. By His Spirit within us; by that all-sufficient and perfect example of His life; by the word of His Gospel; and by the manifold indications of His providence; Jesus Christ is our Guide. If ever we go astray, it is not His fault, but ours. How gentle and loving that guidance is none who have not yielded to it can tell! How wise and sure, none but those who have followed it know! He does not

Digitized by Google

say "Go," but "Come." When He puts forth His sheep, He goes before them. In all rough places His quick hand is put out to save us. In danger He lashes us to Himself, as Alpine guides do when there is perilous ice to get over. As one of the psalms puts it, with wonderful beauty: "I will guide thee with Mine eye"—a glance, not a blow—a look of directing love, that at once heartens to duty and tells duty. We must be very near Him to catch that look, and very much in sympathy with Him to understand it; and when we do, we must be swift to obey. Our eyes must be ever toward the Lord, or we shall often be marching on, unwitting that the pillar has spread itself for rest, or idly dawdling in our tents long after the cloud has gathered itself up for the march. Do not let impatience lead you to hasty interpretation of His plans before they are fairly evolved. Many men by self-will, by rashness, by precipitate hurry in drawing conclusions about what they ought to do, have ruined their lives. Take care, in the old-fashioned phrase, "of running before you are sent." There should always be a good clear space between the guiding ark and you, "about two thousand cubits by measure," that there may be no mistakes about the road. It is neither reverent nor wise to be treading on the heels of our Guide in our eager confidence that we know where He wants us to go.

Do not let the warmth by the camp-fire, or the pleasantness of the shady place where your tent is pitched, keep you there when the cloud lifts. Be ready for change, be ready for continuance, because you are in fellowship with your Leader and Commander; and let Him say, Go, and you go; Do this, and you gladly do it, until the hour when He will whisper, Come; and, as you come, the river will part, and the journey will be over. And "the

Digitized by Google

fiery, cloudy pillar," that "guided you all your journey through," will spread itself out an abiding glory, in that higher home where "the Lamb is the light thereof."

All true following of Christ begins with faith, or we might almost say that faith *is* following, for we find our Lord substituting the former expression for the latter in another passage of this Gospel parallel with the present. "I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on Me should not walk in darkness." The two ideas are not equivalent, but faith is the condition of following; and following is the outcome and test, because it is the operation of faith. None but they who trust Him will follow Him. He who does not follow, does not trust. To follow Christ, means to long and strive after His companionship, as the Psalmist says, "My soul followeth hard after Thee." It means the submission of the will, the effort of the whole nature, the daily conflict to reproduce His example, the resolute adoption of His command as my law, His providence as my will, His fellowship as my joy. And the root and beginning of all such following is in coming to Him, conscious of mine own darkness, and trustful in His great light. We must rely on a Guide before we accept His directions; and it is absurd to pretend that we trust Him, if we do not go as He bids us. So "follow thou Me" is, in a very real sense, the sum of all Christian duty.

That thought opens out very wide fields, into which we must not even glance now; but I cannot help pausing here to repeat the remark already made, as to the gigantic and incomprehensible self-confidence that speaks here: "Followeth *Me*." Then Jesus Christ calmly proposes Himself as the aim and goal for every soul of man; sets up His own doings as an all-sufficient rule for us all, with

Digitized by Google

all our varieties of temper, character, culture, and work, and quietly assumes to have a right of precedence before, and of absolute command over, the whole world. They are all to keep *behind* Him, He thinks, be they saints or sages, kings or beggars; and the liker they are to Himself, He thinks, the nearer they will be to perfectness and life. He puts Himself at the head of the mystic march of the generations, and, like the mysterious angel that Joshua saw in the plain by Jericho, makes the lofty claim: "Nay, but as *Captain* of the Lord's host am I come up." Do we admit His claim because we know His name? do we yield Him full trust because we have learned that He is the Light of men, because He is the Word of God? Do we follow Him with loyal obedience, longing love, and lowly imitation, because He has been and is to us the Saviour of our souls?

In the measure in which we do, the great promises of this wonderful saying will be verified and understood by us—"He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness." That saying has, as one may say, a lower and a higher fulfilment. In the lower, it refers to practical life and its perplexities. Nobody who has not tried it would believe how many difficulties are cleared out of a man's road by the simple act of trying to follow Christ. No doubt there will still remain obscurities enough as to what we ought to do, to call for the best exercise of patient wisdom; but an enormous proportion of them vanish like mist when the sun looks through, when once we honestly set ourselves to find out where the pillared Light is guiding. It is a reluctant will, and intrusive likings and dislikings, that obscure the way for us, much oftener than real obscurity in the way itself. It is seldom impossible to discern the Divine will, when we only wish

Digitized by Google

to know it that we may do it. And if ever it is impossible for us, surely that impossibility is like the cloud resting on the tabernacle—a sign that for the present His will is that we should be still, and wait, and watch.

But there is a higher meaning in the words than even this promise of practical direction. In the profound symbolism of Scripture, especially of this Gospel, "darkness" is the name for the whole condition of the soul averted from God. So our Lord here is declaring that to follow Him is the true deliverance from that midnight of the soul. There is a darkness of ignorance, a darkness of impurity, a darkness of sorrow,—and in that threefold gloom, thickening to a darkness of death, are they enwrapt who follow not the Light. That is the grim tragical side of this saying, too sad, too awful for our lips to speak much of, and best left in the solemn impressiveness of that one word. But the hopeful, blessed side of it is, that the feeblest beginnings of trust in Jesus Christ, and the first tottering steps that try to tread in His, bring us into the light. It does not need that we have reached our goal, it is enough that our faces are turned to it, and our hearts desire to attain it, then we may be sure that the dominion of the darkness over us is broken. To follow, though it be afar off, and with unequal steps, fills our path with increasing brightness, and even though evil and ignorance and sorrow may thrust their blackness in upon our day, they are melting in the growing glory, and already we may give thanks "unto the Father who hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son."

But we have not merely the promise that we shall be

Digitized by Google

led by the light and brought into the light. A yet deeper and grander gift is offered here: "He shall have the light of life." I suppose that means not, as it is often carelessly taken to mean, a light which illuminates the life, but, like the similar phrases of this Gospel, "bread of life," "water of life,"—light which is life. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." These two are one in their source, which is Jesus, the Word of God. Of Him we have to say, "With Thee is the fountain of life, in Thy light shall we see light." They are one in their deepest nature, the life is the light, and the light the life. And this one gift is bestowed upon every soul that follows Christ. Not only will our outward lives be illumined or guided from without, but our inward being will be filled with the brightness. "Ye were sometimes darkness, now are ye light in the Lord."

That pillar of fire remained apart and without. But this true and better guide of our souls enters in and dwells in us, in all the fulness of His triple gift of life, and light, and love. Within us He will chiefly prove Himself the guide of our spirits, and will not merely cast His beams on the path of our feet, but will fill and flood us with His own brightness. All light of knowledge, of goodness, of gladness will be ours, if Christ be ours: and ours He surely will be if we follow Him. Let us take heed, lest turning away from Him we follow the will-o'-the-wisps of our own fancies, or the dancing lights, born of putrescence, that flicker above the swamps, for they will lead us into doleful lands where evil things haunt, and into outer darkness. Let us take heed how we use that light of God; for Christ, like His symbol of old, has a double aspect according to the eye which looks. "It came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp

Digitized by Google

of Israel, and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these." He is either a stone of stumbling or a sure foundation, a savour of life or of death, and which He is depends on ourselves. Trusted, loved, followed, He is light. Neglected, turned from, He is darkness. Though He be the light of the world, it is only the man who follows Him to whom He can give the light of life. Therefore, man's awful prerogative of perverting the best into the worst forced Him, who came to be the light of men, to that sad and solemn utterance: "For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind."

Digitized by Google

XII.

FEAR AND FAITH.

PSALM lvi. 3, 4.

"What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. . . . In God I have put my trust; I will not fear."

IT is not given to many men to add new words to the vocabulary of religious emotion. But so far as an examination of the Old Testament avails, I find that David was the first that ever employed the word that is here translated, *I will trust*, with a religious meaning. It is found occasionally in earlier books of the Bible in different connections, never in regard to man's relations to God, until the Poet-Psalmist laid his hand upon it, and consecrated it for all generations to express one of the deepest relations of man to his Father in heaven.

And it is a favourite word of his. I find it occurs constantly in his psalms; twice as often, or nearly so, in the psalms attributed to David as in all the rest of the Psalter put together; and, as I shall have occasion to show you in a moment, it is in itself a most significant and poetic word.

But, first of all, I ask you to notice how beautifully there comes out here the *occasion* of trust. "What time I am afraid, I will put my trust in Thee."

Digitized by Google

This psalm is one of those belonging to the Sauline persecution. If we adopt the allocation in the superscription, it was written at one of the very lowest points of his fortunes. And there seem to be one or two of its phrases which acquire new force, if we regard the psalm as drawn forth by the perils of his wandering, hunted life. For instance—"Thou tellest my wanderings," is no mere expression of the feelings with which he regarded the changes of this earthly pilgrimage; but is the confidence of the fugitive that in the doublings and windings of his flight God's eye marked him. "Put thou my tears into Thy *bottle*"—one of the few indispensable articles which he had to carry with him, the water-skin which hung beside him, perhaps, as he meditated. So read in the light of his probable circumstances, how pathetic and eloquent does that saying become—"What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee." That goes deep down into the realities of life. It is when we are "afraid" that we trust in God; not in easy times, when things are going smoothly with us. Not when the sun shines, but when the tempest blows and the wind howls about his ears, a man gathers his cloak round him, and cleaves fast to his supporter. The midnight sea lies all black; but when it is cut into by the oar, or divided and churned by the paddle, it flashes up into phosphorescence. And so it is from the tumults and agitation of man's spirit that there is struck out the light of man's faith. There is the bit of flint and the steel that comes hammering against it; and it is the contact of these two that brings out the spark. The man never knew confidence who does not know how the occasion that evoked and preceded was terror and need. "What time I am *afraid*, I will trust." That is no trust which is only fair weather trust. This principle—first fear,

Digitized by Google

and only then, faith—applies all round the circle of our necessities, weaknesses, sorrows, and sins.

There must, first of all, be the deep sense of need, of exposedness to danger, of weakness, of sorrow, and only then will there come the calmness of confidence. A victorious faith will

> "—— rise large and slow
> From out the fluctuations of our souls,
> As from the dim and tumbling sea
> Starts the completed moon."

And then, if so, notice how there is involved in that the other consideration, that a man's confidence is not the product of outward circumstances, but of his own fixed resolves. "I *will* put my trust in Thee."

Nature says, Be afraid, and the recoil from that natural fear, which comes from a discernment of threatening evil, is only possible by a strong effort of the will. Foolish confidence opposes to natural fear a groundless resolve not to be afraid, as if heedlessness were security, or facts could be altered by resolving not to think about them. True faith, by a mighty effort of the will, fixes its gaze on our Divine helper, and there finds it possible and wise to lose its fears. It is madness to say, I will not be afraid; it is wisdom and peace to say, I will trust, and not be afraid. But it is no easy matter to fix the eye on God when threatening enemies within arm's length compel our gaze; and there must be a fixed resolve, not indeed to coerce our emotions or to ignore our perils, but to set the Lord before us, that we may not be moved. When war desolates a land, the peasants fly from their undefended huts to the shelter of the castle on the hill-top, but they cannot reach the safety of the strong walls without climbing the steep road. So when calamity darkens round us, or

Digitized by Google

our sense of sin and sorrow shakes our hearts, we need effort to resolve and to carry into practice the resolution, "I flee unto Thee to hide me." Fear, then, is the occasion of faith, and faith is fear transformed by the act of our own will, calling to mind the strength of God, and betaking ourselves thereto. Therefore, do not wonder if the two things lie in your hearts together, and do not say, "I have no faith because I have some fear," but rather feel that if there be the least spark of the former it will turn all the rest into its own bright substance. Here is the stifling smoke, coming up from some newly-lighted fire of green wood, black and choking, and solid in its coils; but as the fire burns up, all the smoke-wreaths will be turned into one flaming spire, full of light and warmth. Do you turn your smoke into fire, your fear into faith. Do not be down-hearted if it takes a while to convert the whole of the lower and baser into the nobler and higher. Faith and fear do blend, thank God. They are as oil and water in a man's soul, and the oil will float above, and quiet the waves. "What time I am afraid"—there speaks nature and the heart. "I will trust in Thee"—there speaks the better man within, lifting himself above nature and circumstances, and casting himself into the extended arms of God, who catches him and keeps him safe.

Then, still further, these words, or rather one portion of them, give us a bright light and a beautiful thought as to the *essence* and inmost centre of this faith or trust. Scholars tell us that the word here translated "trust" has a graphic, pictorial meaning for its root idea. It signifies literally to cling to or hold fast anything, expressing thus both the notion of a good tight grip and of intimate union. Now, is not that metaphor vivid and full of teaching as well as of impulse? "I will trust in Thee." "And he exhorted

Digitized by Google

them all, that with purpose of heart they should *cleave* unto the Lord." We may follow out the metaphor of the word in many illustrations. For instance, here is a strong prop, and here is the trailing, lithe feebleness of the vine. Gather up the leaves that are creeping all along the ground, and coil them around that support, and up they go straight towards the heavens. Here is a limpet in some pond or other, left by the tide, and it has relaxed its grasp a little. Touch it with your finger and it grips fast to the rock, and you will want a hammer before you can dislodge it. There is a traveller groping along some narrow broken path, where the chamois would tread cautiously, his guide in front of him. His head reels, and his limbs tremble, and he is all but over, but he grasps the strong hand of the man in front of him, or lashes himself to him by the rope, and he can walk steadily. Or, take that story in the Acts of the Apostles, about the lame man healed by Peter and John. All his life long he had been lame, and when at last healing comes, one can fancy with what a tight grasp "the lame man held Peter and John." The timidity and helplessness of a life-time made him hold fast, even while, walking and leaping, he tried how the unaccustomed "feet and ankle bones" could do their work. How he would clutch the arms of his two supporters, and feel himself firm and safe only as long as he grasped them! That is faith, cleaving to Christ, twining round Him with all the tendrils of our heart, as the vine does round its pole; holding to Him by His hand, as a tottering man does by the strong hand that upholds.

And there is one more application of the metaphor, which perhaps may be best brought out by referring to a passage of Scripture. We find this same expression used in that wonderfully dramatic scene in the Book of Kings,

Digitized by Google

where the supercilious messengers from the king of Assyria came up and taunted the king and his people on the wall. "What confidence is this wherein thou trustest? Now, on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me? Now, behold, thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, on which, if a man lean, it will go into his hand and pierce it: so is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, unto all that trust on him."

The word of our text is employed there, and, as the phrase shows, with a distinct trace of its primary sense. You are trusting or leaning upon this poor paper reed on the Nile banks, that has got no substance, or strength, or pith in it. A man leans upon it, and it runs into the palm of his hand, and makes an ugly festering wound. Such rotten stays are all our earthly confidences. The act of trust, and the miserable issues of placing it on man, are excellently described there. The act is the same when directed to God, but how different the issues. Lean all your weight on God as on some strong staff, and depend upon it that support will never yield nor crack; there will no splinters run into your palms from it.

If I am to cling with my hand I must first empty my hand. Fancy a man saying, I cannot stand unless you hold me up; but I have to hold my Bank Book, and this thing, and that thing, and the other thing; I cannot put them down, so I have not a hand free to lay hold with, you must do the holding. That is what some of us are saying in effect. Now the prayer, "Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe," is a right one; but not from a man who will not put his possessions out of his hands, that he may lay hold of the God who lays hold of him.

"Nothing in my hands I bring."

Then of course, and only then, when we are empty-

Digitized by Google

handed, shall we be free to grip and lay hold; and only then shall we be able to go on with the grand words—

"Simply to Thy cross I cling,"

as some half-drowned, shipwrecked sailor, flung up on the beach, clasps a point of rock, and is safe from the power of the waves that beat around him.

And then one word more. These two clauses that I have put together give us not only the occasion of faith in fear, and the essence of faith in this clinging, but they also give us very beautifully the *victory* of faith. You see with what poetic art—if we may use such words about the breathings of such a soul—he repeats the two main words of the former verse in the latter, only in inverted order—"What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee." He is possessed by the lower emotion, and resolves to escape from its sway into the light and liberty of faith. And then the next words still keep up the contrast of faith and fear, only that now he is possessed by the more blessed mood, and determines that he will not fall back into the bondage and darkness of the baser. "In God I have put my trust; I will not fear." He has confidence, and in the strength of that he resolves that he will not yield to fear. If we put that thought into a more abstract form it comes to this: that the one true antagonist and triumphant rival of all fear is faith, and faith alone. There is no reason why any man should be emancipated from his fears either about this world or about the next, except in proportion as he has faith. Nay, rather it is far away more rational to be afraid than not to be afraid, unless I have this faith in Christ. There are plenty of reasons for dread in the dark possibilities and not less dark certainties of life. Disasters, losses, part-

Digitized by Google

ings, disappointments, sicknesses, death, may any of them come at any moment, and some of them will certainly come sooner or later. Temptations lurk around us like serpents in the grass, they beset us in open ferocity like lions in our path. Is it not wise to fear unless our faith has hold of that great promise, "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder; there shall no evil befall thee"? But if we have a firm hold of God, then it is wise not to be afraid, and terror is folly and sin. For trust brings not only tranquillity, but security, and so takes away fear by taking away danger.

That double operation of faith in quieting and in defending is very strikingly set forth by an Old Testament word, formed from the verb here employed, which means properly *confidence*, and then in one form comes to signify both *in security* and *in safety*, secure as being free from anxiety, safe as being sheltered from peril. So, for instance, the people of that secluded little town of Laish, whose peaceful existence amidst warlike neighbours is described with such singular beauty in the Book of Judges, are said to "dwell *careless*, quiet, and *secure*." The former phrase is literally "in trust," and the latter is "trusting." The idea sought to be conveyed by both seems to be that double one of quiet freedom from fear and from danger. So, again, in Moses' blessing, "The beloved of the Lord shall dwell *in safety* by Him," we have the same phrase to express the same twofold benediction of shelter, by dwelling in God, from all alarm and from all attack:

> "As far from danger as from fear,
> While love, almighty love, is near."

This thought of the victory of faith over fear is very forcibly set forth in a verse from the Book of Proverbs, which in our version runs "The righteous is bold as a

Digitized by Google

lion." The word rendered "is bold" is that of our text, and would literally be "trusts," but obviously the metaphor requires such a translation as that of the English Bible. The word that properly describes the act of faith has come to mean the courage which is the consequence of the act, just as our own word *confidence* properly signifies trust, but has come to mean the boldness which is born of trust. So, then, the true way to become brave is to lean on God. That, and that alone, delivers from otherwise reasonable fear, and Faith bears in her one hand the gift of outward safety, and in her other that of inward peace.

Peter is sinking in the water; the tempest runs high. He looks upon the waves, and is ready to fancy that he is going to be swallowed up immediately. His fear is reasonable if he has only the tempest and himself to draw his conclusions from. His helplessness and the scowling storm together strike out a little spark of faith, which the wind cannot blow out, nor the floods quench. Like our Psalmist here, when Peter is afraid, he trusts. "Save, Lord, or I perish." Immediately the outstretched hand of his Lord grasps his, and brings him safety, while the gentle rebuke, "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" infuses courage into his beating heart. The storm runs as high as ever, and the waves beat about his limbs, and the spray blinds his eyes. If he leaves his hold for one moment down he will go. But, as long as he clasps Christ's hand, he is as safe on that heaving floor as if his feet were on a rock; and as long as he looks in Christ's face and leans upon His upholding arm, he does *not* "see the waves boisterous," nor tremble at all as they break around him. His fear and his danger are both gone, because he holds Christ and is upheld by Him. In this sense, too, as in many others, "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

Digitized by Google

XIII.

WAITING AND SINGING.

PSALM lix. 9, 17.

Because of his strength will I wait upon Thee; for God is my defence. . . . Unto Thee, O my strength, will I sing; for God is my defence, and the God of my mercy.

THERE is an obvious correspondence between these two verses, even as they stand in our translation, and still more obviously in the Hebrew. You observe that in the former verse the words "because of" are a supplement inserted by our translators, because they did not exactly know what to make of the bare words as they stood. "His strength, I will wait upon thee," is, of course, nonsense; but a very slight alteration of a single letter, which has the sanction of several good authorities, both among manuscripts and translations, gives an appropriate and beautiful meaning, and brings the two verses into complete verbal correspondence. Suppose we read, "My strength," instead of "His strength." The change is only making the limb of one letter a little shorter, and, as you will perceive, we thereby get the same expressions in both verses. We may then read our two texts thus: "Upon Thee, O my Strength, I will wait . . . Unto Thee, O my Strength, I will sing."

Digitized by Google

They are, word for word, parallel, with the significant difference that the waiting in the one passes into song, in the other the silent expectation breaks into music of praise. And these two words—*wait* and *sing*—are in the Hebrew the same in every letter but one, thus strengthening the impression of likeness as well as emphasizing, with poetic art, that of difference. The parallel, too, obviously extends to the second half of each verse, where the reason for both the waiting and the praise is the same—"For God is my defence"—with the further eloquent variation that the song is built not only on the thought that "God is my defence," but also on this, that He is "the God of my mercy."

These two parallel verses, then, are a kind of refrain, coming in at the close of each division of the psalm; and if you examine its structure and general course of thought, you will see that the first stands at the end of a picture of the Psalmist's trouble and danger, and makes the transition to the second part, which is mainly a prayer for deliverance, and finishes with the refrain altered and enlarged, as I have pointed out.

The heading of the psalm tells us that its date is the very beginning of Saul's persecution, when "they watched the house to kill him," and he fled by night from the city. There is a certain correspondence between the circumstances and some part of the picture of his foes here which makes the date probable. If so, this is one of David's oldest psalms, and is interesting as showing his faith and courage, even in the first burst of danger. But whether that be so or not, we have here, at any rate, the voice of a devout soul in sore sorrow, and may well learn the lesson of its twofold utterance.

The man, overwhelmed by calamity, betakes himself

Digitized by Google

to God. "Upon Thee, O my strength, will I wait, for God is my defence." Then, by dint of *waiting*, although the outward circumstances keep just the same, his temper and feelings change. He began with, "Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord, for they lie in wait for my soul." He passes through "My strength, I will wait upon Thee," and so ends with "My strength, I will sing unto Thee." We may then throw our remarks into two groups, and deal for a few minutes with these two points —the Waiting on God, and the change of Waiting into Praise.

Now, with regard to the first of these—the *Waiting on God*—I must notice that the expression here, "I will *wait*," is a somewhat remarkable one. It means, accurately, "I will watch Thee," and it is the word that is generally employed, not about our looking up to Him, but about His looking down to us. It would describe the action of a shepherd guarding his flock; of a sentry keeping a city; of the watchers that watch for the morning, and the like. By using it, the Psalmist seems as if he would say—There are two kinds of watching. There is God's watching over me, and there is my watching for God. I look up to Him that He may bless; He looks down upon me that He may take care of me. As He guards me, so I stand expectant before Him, as one in a besieged town, upon the ramparts there, looks eagerly out across the plain to see the coming of the long-expected succours. God "waits to be gracious"—wonderful words, painting for us His watchfulness of fitting times and ways to bless us, and His patient attendance on our unwilling, careless spirits. We may well take a lesson from His attitude in bestowing, and, on our parts, wait on Him to be helped. For these two things—vigilance and patience—are the

Digitized by Google

main elements in the Scriptural idea of waiting on God. Let me enforce each of them in a word or two.

There is no waiting on God for help, and there is no help from God, without watchful expectation on our parts. If ever we fail to receive strength and defence from Him, it is because we are not on the outlook for it. Many a proffered succour from heaven goes past us, because we are not standing on our watch-tower to catch the far-off indications of its approach, and to fling open the gates of our heart for its entrance. He who expects no help will get none; he whose expectation does not lead him to be on the alert for its coming will get but little. How the beleaguered garrison, that knows a relieving force is on the march, strain their eyes to catch the first glint of the sunshine on their spears as they top the pass! But how unlike such tension of watchfulness is the languid anticipation and fitful look, with more of distrust than hope in it, which we turn to heaven in our need. No wonder we have so little living experience that God is our "strength" and our "defence," when we so partially believe that He is, and so little expect that He will be either. The homely old proverb says, "They that watch for Providences will never want a providence to watch for," and you may turn it the other way and say, "They that do *not* watch for Providence will never *have* a providence to watch for." Unless you put out your water-jars when it rains you will catch no water; if you do not watch for God coming to help you, God's watching to be gracious will be of no good at all to you. His waiting is not a substitute for ours, but because He watches therefore we should watch. We say, we expect Him to comfort and help us—well, are we standing, as it were, on tiptoe, with empty hands upraised to bring them a little nearer the gifts we look for? Are our "eyes ever

Digitized by Google

towards the Lord?" Do we pore over His gifts, scrutinizing them as eagerly as a gold-seeker does the quartz in his pan, to detect every shining speck of the precious metal? Do we go to our work and our daily battle with the confident expectation that He will surely come when our need is the sorest and scatter our enemies? Is there any clear outlook kept by us for the help which we know must come, lest it should pass us unobserved, and, like the dove from the ark, finding no footing in our hearts drowned in a flood of troubles, be fain to return to the calm refuge from which it came on its vain errand? Alas, how many gentle messengers of God flutter homeless about our hearts, unrecognized and unwelcomed, because we have not been watching for them! Of what avail is it that a strong hand from the cliff should fling the safety-line with true aim to the wreck, if no eye on the deck is watching for it? It hangs there, useless and unseen, and then it drops into the sea, and every soul on board is drowned. It is our own fault—and very largely the fault of our want of watchfulness for the coming of God's help—if we are ever overwhelmed by the tasks, or difficulties, or sorrows of life. We wonder that we are left to fight out the battle ourselves. But are we? Is it not rather, that while God's succours are hastening to our side we will not open our eyes to see, nor our hearts to receive them? If we go through the world with our hands hanging listlessly down instead of lifted to heaven, or full of the trifles and toys of this present, as so many of us do, what wonder is it if heavenly gifts of strength do not come into our grasp? That attitude of watchful expectation is wonderfully described for us in the graphic words of another psalm, "My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the

Digitized by Google

morning." What a picture that is! Think of the wakeful, sick man, tossing restless all the night on his tumbled bed, wracked with pain made harder to bear by the darkness. How often his heavy eye is lifted to the window-pane, to see if the dawn has not yet begun to tint it with a gray glimmer! How he groans, "Would God it were morning!" Or, think of some unarmed and solitary man, benighted in the forest, and hearing the wild beasts growl, and scream, and bark all round, while his fire dies down, and he knows that his life depends on the morning breaking soon. With yet more eager expectation are we to look for God, whose coming is a better morning for our sick and defenceless spirits. If we are not so looking for His help, we need never be surprised that we do not get it. There is no promise and no probability that it will come to men in their sleep, who neither desire it nor wait for it. And such vigilant expectation will be accompanied with patience. There is no impatience in it, but the very opposite. "If we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." If we know that He will surely come, then if He tarry we can wait for Him. The measure of our confidence is ever the measure of our patience. Being sure that He is always "in the midst of" Zion, we may be sure that at the right time He will flame out into delivering might, "helping her, and that right early." So Waiting means Watchfulness and Patience, both of which have their roots in Trust.

Further, we have here set forth not only the nature, but also the object of this waiting. "Upon Thee, O *my strength*, will I wait, for God is *my defence*."

The object to which it is directed, and the ground on which it is based, are both set forth in these two names here applied to God. The name of the Lord is strength,

Digitized by Google

therefore I wait on Him in the confident expectation of receiving of His power. The Lord is "my defence," therefore I wait on Him in the confident expectation of safety. The one name has respect to our condition of feebleness and inadequacy for our tasks, and points to God as infusing strength into us. The other points to our exposedness to danger and to enemies, and points to God as casting His shelter around us. The word translated defence is literally "a high fortress," and is the same as closes the rapturous accumulation of the names of his delivering God, which the Psalmist gives us when he vows to love Jehovah, who has been his Rock, and Fortress, and Deliverer; his God in whom he will trust, his Buckler, and the Horn of his salvation, and his *High Tower*. The first name speaks of God dwelling in us, and His strength made perfect in our weakness; the second speaks of our dwelling in God, and our defencelessness sheltered in Him. "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it, and is safe." As some outnumbered army, unable to make head against its enemies in the open, flees to the shelter of some hill fortress, perched upon a crag, and, taking up the drawbridge, cannot be reached by anything that has not wings; so this man, hard pressed by his foes, flees into God to hide him, and feels secure behind these strong walls.

That is the God on whom we wait. The recognition of His character as thus mighty and ready to help is the only thing that will evoke our expectant confidence, and His character thus discerned is the only object that our confidence can grasp aright. Trust Him as what He is, and trust Him because of what He is, and see to it that your faith lays hold on the living God Himself, and on nothing beside.

Digitized by Google

But waiting on God is not only the recognition of His character as revealed, but it involves, too, the act of laying hold on all the power and blessing of that character for myself. "*My* strength, *my* defence," says the Psalmist. So think of what He is, and believe that He is that for *you*, else there is no true waiting on Him. Make God thy very own by claiming thine own portion in His might, by betaking thyself to that strong habitation. We cannot wait on God in crowds, but, one by one, must say, "*My* strength and *my* defence."

And now turn to the second verse of our two texts: "Unto thee, O my strength, will I sing, for God is my defence and the God of my mercy."

Here we catch, as it were, waiting expectation and watchfulness in the very act of passing over into possession and praise. For remember the aspect of things has not changed a bit between the first verse of our text and the last. The enemies are all round about David just as they were, "making a noise like a dog," as he says, and "going round about the city." The evil that was threatening him and making him sad remains entirely unlightened. What has altered? He has altered. And how has he altered? Because his waiting on God has begun to work an inward change, and he has climbed up, as it were, out of the depths of his sorrow up into the sunlight. And so it ever is, my friends! There is deliverance in spirit before there is deliverance in outward fact. If our patient waiting bring, as it certainly will bring, at the right time, an answer in the removal of danger, and the lightening of sorrow, it will bring first the better answer: "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding," to keep your hearts and minds. That is the highest blessing we have to seek for in our waiting on

Digitized by Google

God, and that is the blessing we get as soon as we wait on Him. The outward deliverance may tarry, but ever there come before it, as a herald of its approach, the sense of a lightened burden and the calmness of a strengthened heart. It may be long before the morning breaks, but even while the darkness lasts a faint air begins to stir among the sleeping leaves, the promise of the dawn, and the first notes of half-awakened birds prelude the full chorus that will hail the sunrise.

It is beautiful, I think, to see, how in the compass of this one little psalm the singer has, as it were, wrought himself clear, and sung himself out of his fears. The stream of his thought, like some mountain torrent, turbid at first, has run itself bright and sparkling. How all the tremor and agitation has gone away, just because he has kept his mind for a few minutes in the presence of the calm thought of God and His love. The first courses of his psalm, like those of some great building, are laid deep down in the darkness, but the shining summit is away up there in the sunlight, and God's glittering glory is sparklingly reflected from the highest point. Whoever begins with, "Deliver me—I will wait upon thee," will pass very quickly, even before the outward deliverance comes, into—"O my strength, unto Thee will I sing!" Every song of true trust, though it may begin with a minor, will end in a burst of jubilant gladness. No prayer ought ever to deal with complaints, we know, without starting with thanksgiving, and, blessed be God, no prayer need to deal with complaints without ending with thanksgiving. So, all our cries of sorrow, and all our acknowledgments of weakness and need, and all our plaintive beseechings, should be inlaid, as it were, between two layers of brighter and gladder thought, like dull rock

Digitized by Google

between two veins of gold. The prayer that begins with thankfulness, and passes on into waiting, even while in sorrow and sore need, will always end in thankfulness, and triumph, and praise.

If we regard this second verse of our text as the expression of the psalmist's emotion at the moment of its utterance, then we see in it a beautiful illustration of the effect of faithful waiting to turn complaining into praise. If we regard it rather as an expression of his confidence, that "I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance," we see in it an illustration of the power of patient waiting to brighten the sure hope of deliverance, and to bring summer into the heart of winter. As resolve, or as prophecy, it is equally a witness of the large reward of quiet waiting for the salvation of the Lord.

In either application of the words their almost precise correspondence with those of the previous verse is far more than a mere poetic ornament, or part of the artistic form of the psalm. It teaches us this happy lesson—that the song of accomplished deliverance, whether on earth, or in the final joy of heaven, will be but a sweeter, fuller repetition of the cry that went up in trouble from our waiting hearts. The object to which we shall turn with our thankfulness is He to whom we betook ourselves with our prayers. There will be the same turning of the soul to Him; only instead of wistful waiting in the longing look, joy will light her lamps in our eyes, and thankfulness beam in our faces as we turn to His light. We shall look to Him as of old, and name Him what we used to name Him when we were in weakness and warfare,—our "strength" and "our defence." But how different the feelings with which the delivered soul calls Him so, from those with which the sorrowful heart tried to grasp the

Digitized by Google

comfort of the names. Then their reality was a matter of faith, often hard to hold fast. Now it is a matter of memory and experience. "I called Thee my strength when I was full of weakness; I tried to believe Thou wast my defence when I was full of fear; I thought of Thee as my fortress when I was ringed about with foes; I know Thee now for that which I then trusted that Thou wast. As I waited upon Thee that Thou mightest be gracious, I praise Thee now that Thou hast been more gracious than my hopes." Blessed are they whose loftiest expectations were less than their grateful memories and their rich experience, and who can take up in their song of praise the names by which they called on God, and feel that they knew not half their depth, their sweetness, or their power.

But the praise is not merely the waiting transformed. Experience has not only deepened the conception of the meaning of God's name; it has added a new name. The cry of the suppliant was to God, his strength and defence; the song of the saved is to the God who is also the God of his mercy. The experiences of life have brought out more fully the love and tender pity of God. While the troubles lasted it was hard to believe that God was strong enough to brace us against them, and to keep us safe in them; it was harder still to think of them as coming from Him at all; it was hardest to feel that they came from His love. But when they are past, and their meaning is plainer, and we possess their results in the weight of glory which they have wrought out for us, we shall be able to look back on them all as the mercies of the God of our mercy, even as when a man looks down from the mountain-top upon the mists and the clouds through which he passed, and sees them all smitten by

Digitized by Google

the sunshine that gleams upon them from above. That which was thick and damp as he was struggling through it, is irradiated into rosy beauty; the retrospective and downward glance confirms and surpasses all that faith dimly discerned, and found it hard to believe. Whilst we are fighting here, brethren, let us say, "I will wait for Thee," and then yonder we shall, with deeper knowledge of the love that was in all our sorrows, sing unto Him who was our strength in earth's weakness, our defence in earth's dangers, and is for evermore the "God of our mercy," amidst the large and undeserved favours of heaven.

Digitized by Google

XIV.

QUARTUS A BROTHER.

ROMANS xvi. 23.

And Quartus a brother.

I AM afraid very few of us read often, or with much interest, those long lists of names at the end of Paul's letters. And yet there are plenty of lessons in them, if anybody will look at them lovingly and carefully. There does not seem much in these three words; but I am very much mistaken if they will not prove to be full of beauty and pathos, and to open out into a wonderful revelation of what Christianity is and does, as soon as we try to freshen them up into some kind of human interest.

It is easy for us to make a little picture of this brother Quartus. He is evidently an entire stranger to the Church in Rome. They had never heard his name before: none of them knew anything about him. Further, he is evidently a man of no especial reputation or position in the Church at Corinth, from which Paul writes. He contrasts strikingly with the others who send salutations to Rome. "Timotheus, my work-fellow"—the companion and helper of the Apostle, whose name was known everywhere among the Churches, heads the list. Then come other prominent men of his more immediate circle. Then follows a loving greeting from Paul's amanu-

Digitized by Google

ensis, who, naturally, as the pen is in his own hand, says: "*I* Tertius, who wrote this Epistle, salute you in the Lord." Then Paul begins again to dictate, and the list runs on. Next comes a message from "Gaius mine host, and of the whole Church"—an influential man in the community, apparently rich, and willing, as well as able, to extend to them large and loving hospitality. Erastus, the chamberlain or treasurer of the city, follows; a man of consequence in Corinth. And then, among all these people of mark, comes the modest, quiet Quartus. He has no wealth like Gaius, nor civil position like Erastus, nor wide reputation like Timothy. He is only a good, simple, unknown Christian. He feels a spring of love open in his heart to these brethren far across the sea, whom he never met. He would like them to know that he thought lovingly of them, and to be lovingly thought of by them. So he begs a little corner in Paul's letter, and gets it; and there, in his little niche, like some statue of a forgotten saint, scarce seen amidst the glories of a great cathedral, "Quartus a brother" stands to all time.

The first thing that strikes me in connection with these words is, how deep and real they show that new bond of Christian love to have been.

A little incident of this sort is more impressive than any amount of mere talk about the uniting influence of the Gospel. Here we get a glimpse of the power in actual operation in a man's heart, and if we think of all that this simple greeting pre-supposes and implies, and of all that had to be overcome before it could have been sent, we may well see in it the sign of the greatest revolution that was ever wrought in men's relations to one another. Quartus was an inhabitant of Corinth, from which city this letter was written. His Roman name

Digitized by Google

may indicate Roman descent, but of that we cannot be sure. Just as probably he may have been a Greek by birth, and so have had to stretch his hand across a deep crevasse of national antipathy, in order to clasp the hands of his brethren in the great city. There was little love lost between Rome, the rough imperious conqueror, and Corinth, prostrate and yet restive under her bonds, and nourishing remembrances of a freedom which Rome had crushed, and of a culture that Rome haltingly followed.

And how many other deep gulfs of separation had to be bridged before that Christian sense of oneness could be felt! It is impossible for us to throw ourselves completely back to the condition of things which the Gospel found. The world then was like some great field of cooled lava on the slopes of a volcano, all broken up by a labyrinth of clefts and cracks, at the bottom of which one can see the flicker of sulphurous flames. Great gulfs of national hatred, of fierce enmities of race, language, and religion; wide separations of social condition, far profounder than anything of the sort which we know, split mankind into fragments. On the one side was the freeman, on the other, the slave; on the one side, the Gentile, on the other, the Jew; on the one side, the insolence and hard-handedness of Roman rule, on the other, the impotent, and, therefore, envenomed hatred of conquered peoples.

And all this fabric, full of active repulsions and disintegrating forces, was bound together into an artificial and unreal unity by the iron clamp of Rome's power, holding up the bulging walls that were ready to fall—the unity of the slave-gang manacled together for easier driving. Into this hideous condition of things the Gospel comes, and silently flings its clasping tendrils over the wide gaps, and binds the crumbling structure of human society with

Digitized by Google

a new bond, real and living. We know well enough that that was so, but we are helped to apprehend by seeing, as it were, the very process going on before our eyes, in this message from "Quartus a brother."

It reminds us that the very notion of humanity, and of the brotherhood of man, is purely Christian. A world-embracing society, held together by love, was not dreamt of before the Gospel came; and since the Gospel came it is more than a dream. If you wrench away the idea from its foundation, as people do who talk about fraternity, and seek to bring it to pass without Christ, it is a mere piece of Utopian sentiment—a fine dream. But in Christianity it worked. It works imperfectly enough, God knows. Still there is some reality in it, and some power. The Gospel first of all produced the thing and the practice, and then the theory came afterwards. The Church did not talk much about the brotherhood of man, or the unity of the race; but simply ignored all distinctions, and gathered into the fold the slave and his master, the Roman and his subject, fair-haired Goths and swarthy Arabians, the worshippers of Odin and of Zeus, the Jew and the Gentile. That actual unity, utterly irrespective of all distinctions, which came naturally in the train of the Gospel, was the first attempt to realize the oneness of the race, and first taught the world that all men were brethren.

And before this simple word of greeting could have been sent, and the unknown man in Corinth felt love to a company of unknown men in Rome, some profound new impulse must have been given to the world; something altogether unlike any of the forces hitherto in existence. What was that? What should it be but the story of One who gave Himself for the whole world, who binds

Digitized by Google

men into a unity because of His common relation to them all, and through whom the great proclamation can be made: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Brother Quartus' message, like some tiny flower above-ground which tells of a spreading root beneath, is a modest witness to that mighty revolution, and pre-supposes the preaching of a Saviour in whom he and his unseen friends in Rome are one.

So let us learn not to confine our sympathy and the play of our Christian affection within the limits of our personal knowledge. We must go further a-field than that. Like this man, let us sometimes send our thoughts across mountains and sea. He knew nobody in the Roman Church, and nobody knew him, but he wished to stretch out his hand to them, and to feel, as it were, the pressure of their fingers in his palm. That is a pattern for us.

Let me suggest another thing. Quartus was a Corinthian. The Corinthian Church was remarkable for its quarrellings and dissensions. One "said, I am of Paul, and another, I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ." I wonder if our friend Quartus belonged to any of these parties. There is nothing more likely than that he had a much warmer glow of Christian love to the brethren over there in Rome than to those who sat on the same bench with him in the upper room at Corinth. For you know that sometimes it is true about people, as well as about scenery, that "distance lends enchantment to the view." A great many of us have much keener sympathies with "brethren" who are well out of our reach, and whose peculiarities do not jar against ours, than with those who are nearest. I do not say Quartus

Digitized by Google

was one of these, but he may very well have been one of the wranglers in Corinth who found it much easier to love his brother whom he had not seen than his brother whom he had seen. So take the hint, if you need it. Do not let your Christian love go wandering away abroad only, but keep some for home consumption.

Again, how simply, and with what unconscious beauty, the deep reason for our Christian unity is given in that one word, a "Brother." As if he had said, Never mind telling them anything about what I am, what place I hold, or what I do. Tell them I am a brother, that will be enough. It is the only name by which I care to be known; it is the name which explains my love to them.

We are brethren because we are sons of one Father. So that favourite name, by which the early Christians knew each other, rested upon and proclaimed the deep truth that they knew themselves to be all partakers of a common life derived from one Parent. When they said they were brethren, they implied, "We have been born again by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." The great Christian truth of regeneration, the communication of a Divine life from God the Father, through Christ the Son, by the Holy Spirit, is the foundation of Christian brotherhood. So the name is no mere piece of effusive sentiment, but expresses a profound fact. To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become "the sons of God," and therein to become the brethren of all His sons.

That is the true ground of our unity, and of our obligation to love all who are begotten of Him. You cannot safely put them on any other footing. All else—identity of opinion, similarity of practice and ceremonial, local or national ties, and the like—all else is insufficient. It may

Digitized by Google

be necessary for Christian communities to require in addition a general identity of opinion, and even some uniformity in government and form of worship; but if ever they come to fancy that such subordinate conditions of visible oneness are the grounds of their spiritual unity, and to enforce these as such, they are slipping off the real foundation, and are perilling their character as Churches of Christ. The true ground of the unity of all Christians is here: "Have we not all one Father?" We possess a kindred life derived from Him. We are a family of brethren because we are sons.

Another remark is, how strangely and unwittingly this good man has got himself an immortality by that passing thought of his. One loving message has won for him the prize for which men have joyfully given life itself,—an eternal place in history. Wheresoever the Gospel is preached there also shall this be told as a memorial of him. How much surprised he would have been if, as he leaned forward to Tertius hurrying to end his task, and said, "Send my love too," anybody had told him that that one act of his would last as long as the world, and his name be known for ever! And how much ashamed some of the other people in the New Testament would have been if they had known that their passing faults—the quarrel of Euodia and Syntyche for instance—were to be gibbetted for ever in the same fashion! How careful they would have been, and we would be of our behaviour if we knew that it was to be pounced down upon and made immortal in that style! Suppose you were to be told—Your thoughts and acts to-morrow at twelve o'clock will be recorded for all the world to read—you would be pretty careful how you behaved. When a speaker sees the reporters in front of him, he weighs his words.

Digitized by Google

Well, Quartus' little message is written down here, and the world knows it. All our words and works are getting put down too in another Book up there, and it is going to be read out one day. It does seem wonderful that you and I should live as we do, knowing all the while that God is recording it all. If we are not ashamed to do things, and let Him note them "on His tablets that they may be for the time to come, for ever and ever," it is strange that we should be more careful to attitudinize and pose ourselves before one another than before Him. Let us then keep ever in mind "those pure eyes and perfect witness of" the "all-judging" God. The eternal record of this little message is only a symbol of the eternal life and eternal record of all our transient and trivial thoughts and deeds before Him. Let us live so that each act if recorded would shine with some modest ray of true light like brother Quartus' greeting. And let us seek that, like him,—all else about us being forgotten, position, talents, wealth, buried in the dust,—we may be remembered, if we are remembered at all, by such a biography as is condensed into these three words. Who would not wish to have such an epitaph as this? who would not wish to be embalmed, so to speak, in such a record? A sweet fate to live for ever in the world's memory by three words which tell his name, his Christianity, and his brotherly love. So far as we are remembered at all, may the like be our life's history and our epitaph!

Digitized by Google

XV.

SHOD FOR THE ROAD.

DEUTERONOMY xxxiii. 25.

Thy shoes *shall be* iron and brass; and as thy days, *so shall* thy strength *be*.

THERE is a general correspondence between those blessings wherewith Moses blessed the tribes of Israel before his death, and the circumstances and territory of each tribe in the promised land. The portion of Asher, in whose blessing the words of our text occurs, was partly the rocky northern coast and partly the fertile lands stretching to the base of the Lebanon. In the inland part of their land they cultivated large olive groves, the produce of which was trodden out in great rock-hewn cisterns. So the clause before my text is a benediction upon that industry—"let him dip his foot in oil." And then the metaphor naturally suggested by the mention of the foot is carried on into the next words, "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass," the tribe being located upon rocky sea-coast, having rough roads to travel, and so needing to be well shod. The substance, then, of that promise seems to be—strength adequate to and unworn by exercise; while the second clause, though not altogether plain, seems to put a somewhat similar idea in

Digitized by Google

unmetaphorical shape. "As thy days, so shall thy strength be," probably means the promise of power that grows with growing years.

So, then, we have first that thought that God gives as an equipment of *strength proportioned to our work*,—shoes fit for our road. God does not turn people out to scramble over rough mountains with thin-soled boots on; that is the plain English of the words. When an Alpine climber is preparing to go away into Switzerland for rock work, the first thing he does is to get a pair of strong shoes, with plenty of iron nails in the soles of them. So Asher had to be shod for his rough roads, and so each of us may be sure that if God sends us on stony paths He will provide us with strong shoes, and will not send us out on any journey for which He does not equip us well.

There are no difficulties to be found in any path of duty for which he that is called to tread it is not prepared by Him that sent him. Whatsoever may be the road, our equipment is calculated for it, and is given to us from Him that has appointed it.

Is not there a suggestion here, too, as to the *sort* of travelling we may expect to find? An old saying tells us that we do not go to heaven in silver slippers, and the reason is because the road is rough. The "primrose way" leads somewhere else, and *it* may be walked on "delicately." But if we need shoes of iron and brass, we may pretty well guess the kind of road we have before us. If a man is equipped with such things on his feet, depend upon it that there will be use for them before he gets to the end of his day's journey. The thickest sole will make the easiest travelling over rocky roads. So be quite sure of this, that if God gives to us certain endowments and equipments which are only calculated for very toilsome

Digitized by Google

paths, the rough work will not be very far behind the stout shoes.

And see what He does give. See the provision which is made for patience and strength, for endurance and courage, in all the messages of His mercy, in all the words of His love, in all the powers of His Gospel, and then say whether that looks like an easy life of it on our way to the end. Those two ships that went away a while ago upon the brave, and, as some people thought, desperate task of finding the North Pole—any one that looked upon them as they lay in Portsmouth Roads, might know that it was no holiday cruise they were meant for. The thickness of the sides, the strength of the cordage, the massiveness of the equipment, did not look like pleasure-sailing.

And so, dear brethren, if we think of all that is given to us in God's Gospel in the way of stimulus and encouragement, and exhortation, and actual communication of powers, we may calculate from the abundance of the resources how great will be the strain upon us before we come to the end, and our "feet stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem." Go into some of the great fortresses in continental countries, and you will find the store-rooms full of ammunition and provisions; bread enough and biscuits enough, it would look, for half the country, laid up there, and a deep well somewhere or other about the courtyard. What does that mean? It means fighting, that is what it means. So if we are brought into this strong pavilion, so well provisioned, so well fortified and defended, that means that we shall need all the strength that is to be found in those thick walls, and all the sustenance that is to be found in those gorged magazines, and all the refreshment that is to be drawn from that fair, and

Digitized by Google

full, and inexhaustible fountain, before the battle is over and the victory won. Depend upon it, the promise "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass," means Thy road shall be rocky and flinty; and so it is.

And yet, thank God! whilst it is true that it is very hard and very difficult for many of us, and hard and difficult—even if without the "very"—for us all, it is also true that we have the adequate provision sufficient for all our necessities—and far more than sufficient! Oh, it is a poor compliment to the strength that He gives to us to say that it is enough to carry us through! God does not deal out His gifts to people with such an economical correspondence to necessities as that. There is always a wide margin. More than we can ask, more than we can think, more than we can need.

If He were to deal with us as men often deal with one another—"Well, how much do you want? Cannot you do with a little less? There is the exact quantity that you need for your support"—if you got the bread by weight and the water by measure, it would be a very poor affair. See how He does. He says, "See, there is Mine own strength for you;" and we think that we honour Him when we say, "God has given us enough for our necessities." Rather the old word is always true: "So they did eat, and were filled; and they took up of the fragments that remained seven baskets-full." And after they were satisfied and replete with the provision, there was more at the end than when they began.

That suggests another possible thought to be drawn from this promise, namely, that it assures not only of strength adequate to the difficulties and perils of the journey, but also of a strength which is *not worn out by use.*

Digitized by Google

The portion of Asher was the rocky sea-coast. The sharp, jagged rocks would cut anything of leather to pieces long before the day's march was over; but the tribe has got its feet shod with metal, and the rocks which they have to stumble over will only strike fire from their shoes. They need not step timidly for fear of wearing them out; but wherever they have to march, may go with full confidence that their shoeing will not fail them. A wise general looks after that part of his soldiers' outfit with special care, knowing that if it gives all the rest is of no use. So our Captain provides us with an inexhaustible strength, to which we may fully trust. We shall not exhaust it by any demands that we can make upon it. We shall only brighten it up, like the nails in a well-used shoe, the heads of which are polished by stumbling and scrambling over rocky roads.

So we may be bold in the march, and draw upon our stock of strength to the utmost. There is no fear that it will fail us. We may put all our force into our work, we shall not weaken the power which "by reason of use is *exercised*," not exhausted. For the grace which Christ gives us to serve Him, being Divine, is subject to no weariness, and neither faints nor fails. The bush that burned unconsumed is a type of that Infinite Being which works unexhausted, and lives undying; after all expenditure is rich; after all pouring forth is full. And of His strength we partake.

Whensoever a man puts forth an effort of any kind whatever—when I speak, when I lift my hand, when I run, when I think—there is waste of muscular tissue. Some of my strength goes in the act, and thus every effort means expenditure and diminution of force. Hence weariness that needs sleep, waste that needs food, languor

Digitized by Google

that needs rest. We belong to an order of things in which work is death, in regard of the physical world; but our spirits may lay hold of God, and enter into an order of things in which work is not death, nor effort exhaustion, nor any loss of power in the expenditure of power.

That sounds strange! And yet it is not strange. Did you ever see that electric light which is made by directing a strong stream upon two small pieces of carbon? As the electricity strikes upon these and turns their blackness into a fiery blaze, it eats away their substance as it changes them into light. But there is an arrangement in the lamp by which a fresh surface is continually being brought into the path of the beam, and so the light continues without wavering and blazes on. The carbon is our human nature, black and dull in itself; the electric beam is the swift energy of God, which makes us light in the Lord. For the one decay is the end of effort; for the other there is none. Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. Though we belong to the perishing order of nature by our bodily frame, we belong to the undecaying realm of grace by the spirit that lays hold upon God. And if our work weary us, as it must do so long as we continue here, yet in the deepest sanctuary of our being our strength is quickened by exercise. "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass." "Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years." "Stand, therefore, having your feet shod with the preparedness of the Gospel of peace."

But this is not all. There is an advance even upon these great promises in the closing words. That second clause of our text says more than the first one. "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass." That promises us powers

Digitized by Google

and provision adapted to and unexhausted by the weary pilgrimage and rough road of life. But "as thy days, so shall thy strength be," says even more than that. The meaning of the word rendered "strength" in our version is very doubtful, and most modern translators are inclined to render it "rest." But if we adhere to the translation of our version, we get a forcible and relevant promise, which fits on well to the previous clause, understood as it has been in my previous remarks. The usual understanding of the words is "strength proportioned to thy day," an idea which we have found already suggested by the previous clause. But that explanation rests on, or at any rate derives support from, the common misquotation of the words. They are not, as we generally hear them quoted, "As thy day, so shall thy strength be,"—but "day" is in the plural, and that makes a great difference. "As thy days, so shall thy strength be." That is to say: the two sums—of "thy days" and of "thy strength"—keep growing side by side, the one as fast as the other and no faster. The days increase. Well, what then? The strength increases too. As I said, we are allied to two worlds. According to the law of one of them, the outer world of physical life, we soon reach the summit of human strength. For a little while it is true, even in the life of nature, that our power grows with our days. But we soon reach the watershed, and then the opposite comes to be true. Down, steadily down we go with diminishing power, with diminishing vitality, with a dimmer eye, with an obtuser ear, with a slower beating heart, with a feebler frame, we march on and on to our grave! "As thy days, so shall thy weakness be," is the law for all of us mature men and women in regard to our outward life.

But oh, dear brethren, we may be emancipated from

Digitized by Google

that dreary law in regard to the true life of our spirits, and instead of getting weaker as we get older, we may and we should get stronger. We may be and we should be moving on a course that has no limit to its advance. We may be travelling on a shining path through the heavens, that has no noon-tide height from which it must slowly and sadly decline, but tends steadily and for ever upwards, nearer and nearer to the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance. "The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more till the noon-tide of the day." But the reality surpasses even that grand thought, for it points us to an endless approximation, to an infinite beauty, and to ever-growing possession of never exhausted fulness, as the law for the progress of all Christ's servants. The life of each of us may and should be continual accession and increase of power through all the days here, through all the ages beyond. Why? Because "the life which I live, I live by the faith of the Son of God." Christ liveth in me. It is not my strength that grows, so much as God's strength in me which is given more abundantly as the days roll. It is so given on one condition. If my faith has laid hold of the infinite, the exhaustless, the immortal energy of God, unless there is something fearfully wrong about me I shall be getting purer, nobler, wiser; more observant of His will; gentler, liker Christ; every way fitter for His service, and for larger service, as the days increase.

Those of us who have reached middle life, or perhaps got a little over the watershed, ought to have this experience as our own in a very distinct degree. The years that are gone ought to have drawn us somewhat away from our hot pursuing after earthly and perishable things. They should have added something to the clearness and

Digitized by Google

completeness of our perception of the deep simplicity of God's gospel. They should have tightened our hold and increased our possession of Christ, unfolding more and more of His all-sufficiency. They should have enriched us with memories of God's loving care, and lighted all the sky behind with a glow which is reflected on the path before us, and becomes calm confidence in His unfailing goodness. They should have given us power and skill for the conflicts that yet remain, as the Red Indians believe that the strength of every defeated and scalped enemy passes into his conqueror's arm. They should have given force to our better nature, and weakening, progressive weakening, to our worse. They should have rooted us more firmly and abidingly in Him from whom all our power comes, and so have given us more and fuller supplies of His exhaustless and ever-flowing might.

So it may be with us if we abide in Him, without whom we are nothing, but partaking of whose strength "the weakest shall be as David, and David as an angel of God."

If for us, drawing nearer to the end is drawing nearer to the light, our faces shall be brightened more and more with that light which we approach, and our path shall be "as the shining light which shines more and more unto the noon-tide of the day," because we are closer to the very fountain of heavenly radiance, and growingly bathed and flooded with the outgoings of His glory. "As thy days, so shall thy strength be."

The promise ought to be true for us all. It *is* true for all who use the things that are freely given to them of God. And whilst thus it is the law for the devout life here, its most glorious fulfilment remains for the life beyond. There each new moment shall bring new strength, and growing millenniums but add fresh vigour to our im-

Digitized by Google

mortal life. Here the unresting beat of the waves of the sea of time gnaws away the bank and shoal whereon we stand, but there each roll of that great ocean of eternity shall but spread new treasures at our feet and add new acres to our immortal heritage. The oldest angels, says Swedenborg, seem the youngest. When life is immortal, the longer it lasts the stronger it becomes, and so the spirits that have stood for countless days before His throne, when they appear to human eyes appear as "young men clothed in long white garments"—full of unaging youth, and energy that cannot wane. So, whilst in the flesh we must obey the law of decay, the spirit may be subject to this better law of life, and "while the outward man perisheth, the inward man be renewed day by day." "Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength."

Digitized by Google

XVI.

TAKING FROM GOD THE BEST GIVING TO GOD.

PSALM cxvi. 12, 13.

What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits towards me? I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord.

THERE may possibly be a reference here to a part of the Passover ritual. It seems to have become the custom in later times to lift high the wine-cup at that feast and drink it with solemn invocation and glad thanksgiving. So we find our Lord taking the cup—the "cup of blessing" as Paul calls it—and giving thanks. But, as there is no record of the introduction of that addition to the original Paschal celebration, we do not know but that it was later than the date of this psalm. Nor is there any need to suppose such an allusion in order either to explain or to give picturesque force to the words. It is a most natural thing, as all languages show, to talk of a man's lot, either of sorrow or joy, as the cup which he has to drink; and there are plenty of instances of the metaphor in the Psalms, such as "Thou art the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup, Thou maintainest my lot." "My cup runneth over." That familiar emblem is all that is wanted here.

Digitized by Google

Then, one other point in reference to the mere words of the text may be noticed. "Salvation" can scarcely be taken in its highest meaning here, both because the whole tone of the psalm fixes its reference to lower blessings, and because it is in the plural in the Hebrew. "The cup of salvation" expresses, by that plural form, the fulness and variety of the manifold and multiform deliverances which God had wrought and was working for the Psalmist. His whole lot in life appears to him as a cup-full of tender goodness, loving faithfulness, delivering grace. It runs over with Divine acts of help and sustenance. As his grateful heart thinks of all God's benefits to him, he feels at once the impulse to requite and the impossibility of doing it. With a kind of glad despair he asks the question that ever springs to thankful lips, and having nothing to give, recognizes the only possible return to God to be the acceptance of the brimming chalice which His goodness commends to his thirst.

The great thought, then, which lies here is that we best requite God by thankfully taking what He gives.

Now, I note to begin with—*how deep that thought goes into the heart of God.*

Why is it that we honour God most by taking, not by giving? The first answer that occurs to you, no doubt, is—because of His all-sufficiency and our emptiness. Man receives all. God needs nothing. We have all to say, after all our service, "of Thine own have we given Thee." No doubt that is quite true; and rightly understood that is a strengthening and a glad truth. But is that all which can be said in explanation of this principle? Surely not. "If I were hungry I would not tell thee; for the world is Mine and the fulness thereof," is a grand word, but it does not give all the

Digitized by Google

truth. When Paul stood on Mars Hill, and within sight of the fair images of the Parthenon shattered the intellectual basis of idolatry, by proclaiming a God "not worshipped with men's hands as though He needed anything, seeing He giveth to all men all things," that truth, mighty as it is, is not all. We requite God by taking rather than by giving, not merely because He needs nothing and we have nothing which is not His. If that were all, it might be as true of an almighty tyrant, and might be so used as to forbid all worship before the gloomy presence, to give reverence and love to whom were as impertinent as the grossest offerings of savage idolaters. But the motive of His giving to us is the deepest reason why our best recompense to Him is our thankful reception of His mercies. The principle of our text reposes at last on "God is love and wishes our hearts," and not merely on "God has all and does not need our gifts."

Take the illustration of our own love and gifts. Do we not feel that all the beauty and bloom of a gift is gone if the giver hoped to receive as much again? Do we not feel that it is all gone if the receiver thinks of repaying it in any coin but that of the heart? Love gives because it delights in giving. It gives that it may express itself and may bless the recipient. If there be any thought of return it is only the return of love. And that is how God gives. As James puts it, He is "the giving God,—who gives," not as our version inadequately renders, "liberally," but "simply"—that is, I suppose, with a single eye, without any ulterior view to personal advantage, from the impulse of love alone, and having no end but our good. Therefore, it is—because of that pure, perfect love, that He delights in no recompense, but only in the payment of a heart won to His love and melted by His mercies.

Digitized by Google

Therefore it is that His hand is outstretched, "hoping for nothing again." His Almighty all-sufficiency needs nought from us, and to all heathen notions of worship and tribute puts the question: "Do ye requite the Lord, O foolish people and unwise?" But His deep heart of love desires and delights in the echo of its own tones that is evoked among the rocky hardnesses of our hearts, and is glad when we take the full cup of His blessings, and as we raise it to our lips call on the name of the Lord. Is not that a great and a gracious thought, of our God and of His great purpose in His mercies?

But now let us look for a moment at the *elements which make up this requital of God in which He delights*. And first—I put a very simple and obvious one—let us be sure that we recognize the real contents of our cup. It *is* a cup of salvations, however hard it is sometimes to believe it. How much blessing and happiness we all rob ourselves of by our slowness to feel that! Some of us by reason of natural temperament; some of us by reason of the pressure of anxieties, and the aching of sorrows, and the bleeding of wounds; some of us by reason of mere blindness to the true character of our present, have little joyous sense of the real brightness of our days. It seems as if joys must have passed, and be seen in the transfiguring light of memory, before we can discern their fairness; and then, when their place is empty, we know that we were entertaining angels unawares. Many a man and woman lives in the gloom of a life-long regret for the loss of some gift, which, when they had it, seemed nothing very extraordinary, and could not keep them from annoyance with trifles. Common sense and reasonable regard for our own happiness and religious duty unite, as they always do, in bidding us take care

Digitized by Google

that we know our blessings. Do not let custom blind you to them. Do not let tears so fill your eyes that you cannot see the goodness of the Lord. Do not let thunder-clouds, however heavy their lurid piles, shut out from you the blue that is in your sky. Do not let the empty cup be your first teacher of the blessings you had when it was full. Do not let a hard place here and there in the bed destroy your rest. Seek, as a plain duty, to cultivate a buoyant, joyous sense of the crowded kindnesses of God in your daily life. Take full account of all the pains, all the bitter ingredients, remembering that for us weak and sinful men the bitter is needful. If still the cup seem charged with distasteful draught, remember whose lip has touched its rim, leaving its sacred kiss there, and whose hand holds it out to you. He says, "Do this in remembrance of Me." The cup which my Saviour giveth me, can it be anything but a cup of salvations?

Then, again, another of the elements of this Requital of God is—be sure that you take what God gives.

There can be no greater slight and dishonour to a giver than to have his gifts neglected. You give something that has, perhaps, cost you much, or which at any rate has your heart in it, to your child, or other dear one; would it not wound you, if a day or two after you found it tossing about among a heap of unregarded trifles? Suppose that some of those Rajahs that received presents on the recent royal visit to India had gone out from the durbar and flung them into the kennel, that would have been insult and disaffection, would it not? But these illustrations are trivial by the side of our treatment of the "giving God." Surely of all the follies and crimes of our foolish and criminal race, there are

Digitized by Google

none to match this—that we will not take and make our own the things that are freely given to us of God. This is the height of all madness; this is the lowest depth of all sin. He spares not His own Son, the Son spares not Himself. The Father gives up His Son for us all because He loves. The Son loves us, and gives Himself to us and for us. And we stand with our hands folded on our breasts, will not condescend so much as to stretch them out, or hold our blessings with so slack a grasp that at any time we may let them slip through our careless fingers. He prays us with much entreaty to receive the gift, and neglect and stolid indifference are His requital. Is there anything worse than that? Surely Scripture is right when it makes the sin of sins that unbelief, which is at bottom nothing else than a refusal to take the cup of salvation. Surely no sharper grief can be inflicted on the Spirit of God than when we leave His gifts neglected and unappropriated.

In the highest region of all, how many of these there are which we treat so! A Saviour and His pardoning blood; a Spirit and His quickening energies; that eternal life which might spring in our souls a fountain of living waters—all these are ours. Are we as strong as we might be if we used the strength which we have? How comes it that with the fulness of God at our sides we are empty; that with the word of God in our hands we know so little; that with the Spirit of God in our hearts we are so fleshly; that with the joy of our God for our portion we are so troubled; that with the heart of God for our hiding-place we are so defenceless? "We have all and abound," and yet we are poor and needy, like some infatuated beggar in rags and wretchedness, to whom wealth had been given which he would not use.

Digitized by Google

In the lower region of daily life and common mercies the same strange slowness to take what we have is found. There are very few men who really make the best of their circumstances. Most of us are far less happy than we might be, if we had learned the Divine art of wringing the last drop of good out of everything. After our rude attempts at smelting there is a great deal of valuable metal left in the dross, which a wiser system would extract. One wonders when one gets a glimpse of how much of the raw material of happiness goes to waste in the manufacture in all our lives. There is so little to spare, and yet so much is flung away. It needs a great deal of practical wisdom, and a great deal of strong, manly Christian principle, to make the most of what God gives us. Watchfulness, self-restraint, the power of suppressing anxieties and taking no thought for the morrow, and most of all, the habitual temper of fellowship with God, which is the most potent agent in the chemistry that extracts its healing virtue from everything—all these are wanted. The lesson is worth learning, lest we should wound that most tender Love, and lest we should impoverish and hurt ourselves. Do not complain of your thirsty lips till you are sure that you have emptied the cup of salvation which God gives.

One more element of this Requital of God has still to be named—the thankful recognition of Him in all our feasting,—"call on the name of the Lord." Without this, the preceding precept would be a piece of pure selfish Epicureanism—and without this it would be impossible. Only he who enjoys life in God enjoys it worthily. Only he who enjoys life in God enjoys it at all. This is the true infusion which gives sweetness to whatever of bitter, and more of sweetness to whatever of sweet, the cup may con-

Digitized by Google

tain, when the name of the Lord is pronounced above it. The Jewish father at the Passover feast solemnly lifted the wine-cup above his head, and drank with thanksgiving. The meal became a sacrament. So here the word rendered "take" might be translated "raise," and we may be intended to have the picture as emblematical of our consecration of all our blessings by a like offering of them before God, and a like invoking of the Giver.

Christ has given us not only the ritual of an ordinance, but the pattern for our lives, when He took the cup and gave thanks. So common joys become sacraments, enjoyment becomes worship, and the cup which holds the bitter or the sweet skilfully mingled for our lives becomes the cup of blessing and salvation drank in remembrance of Him. If we carried that spirit with us into all our small duties, sorrows, and gladnesses, how different they would all seem! We should then drink for strength, not for drunkenness. We should not then find that God's gifts hid Him from us. We should neither leave any of them unused nor so greedily grasp them that we let His hand go. Nothing would be too great for us to attempt, nothing too small for us to put our strength into. There would be no discord between earthly gladness and heavenly desires, nor any repugnance at what He put to our lips. We should drink of the cup of His benefits, and all would be sweet—until we drew nearer and slaked our thirst at the river of His pleasures and the Fountain-head itself.

One more word. There is an old legend of an enchanted cup filled with poison, and put treacherously into a king's hand. He signed the sign of the cross and named the name of God over it—and it shivered in his grasp. Do you take this name of the Lord as a test. Name Him over many a cup which you are eager to

Digitized by Google

drink of, and the glittering fragments will lie at your feet, and the poison be spilled on the ground. What you cannot lift before His pure eyes and think of Him while you enjoy, is not for you. Friendships, schemes, plans, ambitions, amusements, speculations, studies, loves, businesses—can you call on the name of the Lord while you put these cups to your lips? If not, fling them behind you—for they are full of poison which, for all its sugared sweetness, at the last will bite like a serpent and sting like an adder.

Digitized by Google

XVII.

SILENCE TO GOD.

PSALM LXII. 1, 5.

Truly my soul waiteth upon God. . . . My soul, wait thou only upon God.

WE have here two corresponding clauses, each beginning a section of the psalm. They resemble each other even more closely than appears from the English version, for the "truly" of the first, and the "only" of the second clause, are the same word; and in each case it stands in the same place, namely, at the beginning. So, word for word, the two answer to each other. The difference is, that the one expresses the Psalmist's patient stillness of submission, and the other is his self-encouragement to that very attitude and disposition which he has just professed to be his. In the one he speaks of, in the other to, his soul. He stirs himself up to renew and continue the faith and resignation which he has, and so he sets before us both the temper which we should bear, and the effort which we should make to prolong and deepen it, if it be ours. Let us look at these two points then—the expression of waiting, and the self-exhortation to waiting.

"Truly my soul waiteth upon God." It is difficult to

Digitized by Google

say whether the opening word is better rendered "truly," as here, or "only," as in the other clause. Either meaning is allowable and appropriate. If, with our version, we adopt the former, we may compare with this text the opening of another psalm (lxxiii.), "Truly God is good to Israel," and there, as here, we may see in that vehement affirmation, a trace of the struggle through which it had been won. The Psalmist bursts into song with a word, which tells us plainly enough how much had to be quieted in him before he came to that quiet waiting, just as in the other psalm he pours out first the glad, firm certainty which he had reached, and then recounts the weary seas of doubt and bewilderment through which he had waded to reach it. That one word is the record of conflict and the trophy of victory, the sign of the blessed effect of effort and struggle in a truth more firmly held, and in a submission more perfectly practised. It is as if he had said, Yes! in spite of all its waywardness and fears, and self-willed struggles, my soul waits upon God. I have overcome these, and now there is peace within.

It is to be further observed that literally the words run, "My soul is silence unto God." That forcible form of expression describes the completeness of the Psalmist's unmurmuring submission and quiet faith. His whole being is one great stillness, broken by no clamorous passions; by no loud-voiced desires; by no remonstrating reluctance. There is a similar phrase in another psalm (cix. 4), which may help to illustrate this: "For my love they are my adversaries, but I am prayer"—his soul is all one supplication. The enemies' wrath awakens no flush of passion on his cheek, or ripple of vengeance in his heart. He meets it all with prayer. Wrapped in devotion and heedless of their rage, he is like Stephen,

Digitized by Google

when he kneeled down among his yelling murderers, and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." So here we have the strongest expression of the perfect consent of the whole inward nature in submission and quietness of confidence before God.

That silence is first a silence of the will. The plain meaning of this phrase is, resignation; and resignation is just a silent will. Before the throne of the Great King, His servants are to stand like those long rows of attendants we see on the walls of eastern temples, silent with folded arms, straining their ears to hear, and bracing their muscles to execute his whispered commands, or even his gesture and his glance. A man's will should be an echo, not a voice; the echo of God, not the voice of self. It should be silent, as some sweet instrument is silent till the owner's hand touches the keys. Like the boy-prophet in the hush of the sanctuary, below the quivering light of the dying lamps, we should wait till the awful voice calls, and then, "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth." Do not let the loud utterances of your own wills anticipate, nor drown, the still, small voice in which God speaks. Bridle impatience till He does. If you cannot hear His whisper, wait till you do. Take care of running before you are sent. Keep your wills in equipoise, till God's hand gives the impulse and direction.

Such a silent will is a strong will. It is no feeble passiveness, no dead indifference, no impossible abnegation that God requires, when He requires us to put our wills in accord with His. They are not slain, but vivified by such surrender; and the true secret of strength lies in submission. The secret of blessedness is there, too, for our sorrow comes because there is discord between our circumstances and our wills, and the measure in which

Digitized by Google

these are in harmony with God is the measure in which we shall feel that all things are blessings to be received with thanksgiving. But if we will take our own way, and let our own wills speak before God speaks, or otherwise than God speaks, nothing can come of that but what always has come of it—blunders, sins, misery, and manifold ruin.

We must keep our *hearts* silent too. The sweet voices of pleading affections, the loud cry of desires and instincts that roar for their food like beasts of prey, the querulous complaints of disappointed hopes, the groans and sobs of black-robed sorrows, the loud hubbub and Babel, like the noise of a great city, that every man carries within, must be stifled and coerced into silence. We have to take the animal in us by the throat, and sternly say, Lie down there and be quiet. We have to silence tastes and inclinations. We have to stop our ears to the noises around, however sweet the songs, and to close many an avenue through which the world's music might steal in. He cannot say, "My soul is silent unto God," whose whole being is buzzing with vanities and noisy with the din of the market-place. Unless we have something, at least, of that great stillness, our hearts will have no peace, and our religion no reality.

There must be the silence of the *mind*, as well as of the heart and will. We must not have our thoughts ever occupied with other things, but must cultivate the habit of detaching them from earth, and keeping our minds still before God, that He may pour His light into them. Surely if ever any generation needed the preaching—Be still, and let God speak—we need it. Even religious men are so busy with spreading or defending Christianity, that they have little time, and many of them less inclina-

Digitized by Google

tion for quiet meditation and still communion with God. Newspapers, and books, and practical philanthropy, and Christian effort, and business, and amusement, so crowd into our lives now, that it needs some resolution and some planning to get a clear space where we can be quiet, and look at God.

But the old law for a noble and devout life is not altered by reason of any new circumstances. It still remains true that a mind silently waiting before God is the condition without which such a life is impossible. As the flowers follow the sun, and silently hold up their petals to be tinted and enlarged by his shining, so must we, if we would know the joy of God, hold our souls, wills, hearts, and minds still before Him, whose voice commands, whose love warms, whose truth makes fair our whole being. God speaks for the most part in such silence only. If the soul be full of tumult and jangling noises, His voice is little likely to be heard. As in some kinds of deafness, a perpetual noise in the head prevents hearing any other sounds, the rush of our own fevered blood, and the throbbing of our own nerves, hinder our catching His tones. It is the calm lake which mirrors the sun, the least catspaw wrinkling the surface wipes out all the reflected glories of the heavens. If we would mirror God our souls must be calm. If we would hear God our souls must be silence.

Alas! how far from this is our daily life! Who among us dare to take these words as the expression of our own experience? Is not the troubled sea which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt, a truer emblem of our restless, labouring souls than the calm lake? Put your own selves by the side of this Psalmist, and honestly measure the contrast. It is like the difference between

Digitized by Google

some crowded market-place all full of noisy traffickers, ringing with shouts, blazing in sunshine, and the interior of the quiet cathedral that looks down on it all, where are coolness and subdued light, and silence and solitude. "Come, My people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee." "Commune with your own heart and be still." "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength."

This man's profession of utter resignation is perhaps too high for us; but we can make his *self-exhortation* our own. "My soul! wait thou only upon God." Perfect as he ventures to declare his silence towards God, he yet feels that he has to stir himself up to the effort which is needed to preserve it in its purity. Just because he can say, "My soul waits," therefore he bids his soul wait.

I need not dwell upon that self-stimulating as involving the great mystery of our personality, whereby a man exalts himself above himself, and controls, and guides, and speaks to his soul. But a few words may be given to that thought illustrated here, of the necessity for conscious effort and self-encouragement, in order to the preservation of the highest religious emotion.

We are sometimes apt to forget that no holy thoughts or feelings are in their own nature permanent, and the illusion that they are, often tends to accelerate their fading. It is no wonder if we in our selectest hours of "high communion with the living God" should feel as if that lofty experience would last by virtue of its own sweetness, and need no effort of ours to retain it. But it is not so. All emotion tends to exhaustion, as surely as a pendulum to rest, or as an Eastern torrent to dry up. All our flames burn to their extinction. There is but one fire that blazes and is not consumed. Action is the destruction of tissue.

Digitized by Google

Life reaches its term in death. Joy and sorrow, and hope and fear, cannot be continuous. They must needs wear themselves out and fade into a gray uniformity like mountain summits when the sun has left them.

Our religious experience too will have its tides, and even those high and pure emotions and dispositions that bind us to God can only be preserved by continual effort. Their existence is no guarantee of their permanence, rather is it a guarantee of their transitoriness, unless we earnestly stir up ourselves to their renewal. Like the emotions kindled by lower objects, they perish while they glow, and there must be a continual recurrence to the one source of light and heat if the brilliancy is to be preserved.

Nor is it only from within that their continuance is menaced. Outward forces are sure to tell upon them. The constant wash of the sea of life undermines the cliffs and wastes the coasts. The tear and wear of external occupations is ever acting upon our religious life. Travellers tell us that the constant rubbing of the sand on Egyptian hieroglyphs removes every trace of colour, and even effaces the deep-cut characters from basalt rocks. So the unceasing attrition of multitudinous trifles will take all the bloom off your religion, and efface the name of the King cut on the tables of your hearts, if you do not counteract them by constant, earnest effort. Our devotion, our faith, our love is only preserved by being constantly renewed.

That vigorous effort is expressed here by the very form of the phrase. The same word which began the first clause begins the second also. As in the former it represented for us, with an emphatic "Truly," the struggle through which the Psalmist had reached the height of his

Digitized by Google

blessed experience, so here it represents in like manner the earnestness of the self-exhortation which he addresses to himself. He calls forth all his powers to the conflict, which is needed even by the man who has attained to that height of communion, if he would remain where he has climbed. And for us, brethren, who shrink from taking these former words upon our lips, how much greater the need to use our most strenuous efforts to quiet our souls. If the summit reached can only be held by earnest endeavour, how much more is needed to struggle up from the valleys below.

The silence of the soul before God is no mere passiveness. It requires the intensest energy of all our being to keep all our being still and waiting upon Him. So put all your strength into the task, and be sure that your soul is never so intensely alive as when in deepest abnegation it waits hushed before God.

Trust no past emotions. Do not wonder if they should fade even when they are brightest. Do not let their evanescence tempt you to doubt their reality. But always when our hearts are fullest of His love, and our spirits stilled with the sweetest sense of His solemn presence, stir yourselves up to keep firm hold of the else passing gleam, and in your consciousness let these two words live in perpetual alternation: "Truly my soul waiteth upon God. My soul! wait thou only upon God."

Digitized by Google

XVIII.

THE VALLEY OF ACHOR.

HOSEA ii. 15.

I will give her . . . the valley of Achor for a door of hope.

THE prophet Hosea is remarkable for the frequent use which he makes of events in the former history of his people. Their past seems to him a mirror in which they may read their future. He believes that "which is to be hath already been," the great principles of the Divine government living on through all the ages, and issuing in similar acts when the circumstances are similar. So he foretells that there will yet be once more a captivity and a bondage, that the old story of the wilderness will be repeated once more. In that wilderness God will speak to the heart of Israel. Its barrenness shall be changed into the fruitfulness of vineyards, where the purpling clusters hang ripe for the thirsty travellers. And not only will the sorrows that He sends thus become sources of refreshment, but the gloomy gorge through which they journey—the valley of Achor—will be a door of hope.

One word is enough to explain the allusion. You remember that after the capture of Jericho by Joshua, the people were baffled in their first attempt to press through the narrow defile that led from the plain of Jordan to the

Digitized by Google

highlands of Canaan. Their defeat was caused by the covetousness of Achan, who for the sake of some miserable spoil which he found in a tent, broke God's laws, and drew down shame on Israel's ranks. When the swift, terrible punishment on him had purged the camp, victory again followed their assault, and, Achan lying stiff and stark below his cairn, they pressed on up the glen to their task of conquest. The rugged valley, where that defeat and that sharp act of justice took place, was named in memory thereof, the valley of *Achor*, that is, *trouble;* and our prophet's promise is that as then, so for all future ages, the complicity of God's people with an evil world will work weakness and defeat, but that, if they will be taught by their trouble and will purge themselves of the accursed thing, then the disasters will make a way for hope to come to them again. The figure which conveys this is very expressive. The narrow gorge stretches before us, with its dark overhanging cliffs that almost shut out the sky; the path is rough and set with sharp pebbles; it is narrow, winding, steep; often it seems to be barred by some huge rock that juts across it, and there is barely room for the broken ledge yielding slippery footing between the beetling crag above and the steep slope beneath that dips so quickly to the black torrent below. All is gloomy, damp, hard; and if we look upwards the glen becomes more savage as it rises, and armed foes hold the very throat of the pass. But, however long, however barren, however rugged, however black, however trackless, we may see if we will, a bright form descending the rocky way with radiant eyes and calm lips, God's messenger, Hope;—and the rough rocks are like the doorway through which she comes near to us in our weary struggle. For us all, dear friends, it is true. In all our

Digitized by Google

difficulties and sorrows, be they great or small; in our business perplexities; in the losses that rob our homes of their light; in the petty annoyances that diffuse their irritation through so much of our days,—it is within our power to turn them all into occasions for a firmer grasp of God, and so to make them openings by which a happier hope may flow into our souls.

But the promise, like all God's promises, has its well-defined conditions. Achan has to be killed and put safe out of the way first, or no shining Hope will stand out against the black walls of the defile. The tastes which knit us to the perishable world, the yearnings for Babylonish garments and wedges of gold, must be coerced and subdued. Swift, sharp, unrelenting justice must be done on the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, if our trials are ever to become *doors of hope.* There is no natural tendency in the mere fact of sorrow and pain to make God's love more discernible, or to make our hope any firmer. All depends on how we use the trial, or as I say—first stone Achan and then hope!

So, the trouble which detaches us from earth gives us new hope. Sometimes the effect of our sorrows, and annoyances, and difficulties, is to rivet us more firmly to earth. The eye has a curious power, which they call persistence of vision, of retaining the impression made upon it, and therefore of seeming to see the object for a definite time after it has really been withdrawn. If you whirl a bit of blazing stick round, you will see a circle of fire though there is only a point moving rapidly in the circle. The eye has its memory like the soul. And the soul has its power of persistence like the eye, and that power is sometimes kindled into activity by the fact of loss·

Digitized by Google

We often see our departed joys, and gaze upon them all the more eagerly for their departure. The loss of dear ones should stamp their image on our hearts, and set it as in a golden glory. But it sometimes does more than that; it sometimes makes us put the present with its duties impatiently away from us. Vain regret, absorbed brooding over what is gone, a sorrow kept gaping long after it should have been healed, like a grave-mound off which desperate love has pulled turf and flowers, in the vain attempt to clasp the cold hand below—in a word, the trouble that does not withdraw us from the present will never be a door of Hope, but rather a grim gate for despair to come in at.

The trouble which *knits us to God gives us new hope.* That bright form which comes down the narrow valley is His messenger and herald—sent before His face. All the light of hope is the reflection on our hearts of the light of God. Her silver beams, which shed quietness over the darkness of earth, come only from that great Sun. If our Hope is to grow out of our sorrow, it must be because our sorrow drives us to God. It is only when we by faith stand in His grace, and live in the conscious fellowship of peace with Him, that we rejoice in hope. If we would see Hope drawing near to us, we must fix our eyes not on Jericho that lies behind among its palm-trees, though it has memories of conquests, and attractions of fertility and repose, nor on the corpse that lies below that pile of stones, nor on the narrow way and the strong enemy in front there; but higher up, on the blue sky that spreads peaceful above the highest summits of the pass, and from the heaven we shall see the angel coming to us. Sorrow forsakes its own nature, and leads in its own opposite, when sorrow helps us to see God. It clears away the

Digitized by Google

thick trees, and lets the sunlight into the forest shades, and then in time corn will grow. Hope is but the brightness that goes before God's face, and if we would see it we must look at Him.

The trouble which *we bear rightly with God's help*, gives new hope. If we have made our sorrow an occasion for learning, by living experience, somewhat more of His exquisitely varied and ever ready power to aid and bless, then it will teach us firmer confidence in these inexhaustible resources which we have thus once more proved. "Tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope." That is the order. You cannot put patience and experience into a parenthesis, and omitting them, bring hope out of tribulation. But if in my sorrow I have been able to keep quiet because I have had hold of God's hand, and if in that unstruggling submission I have found that from His hand I have been upheld, and had strength above mine own infused into me, then my memory will give the threads with which Hope weaves her bright web. I build upon two things—God's unchangeableness, and His help already received; and upon these strong foundations I may wisely and safely rear a palace of Hope, which shall never prove a castle in the air. The past, when it is God's past, is the surest pledge for the future. Because He has been with us in six troubles, therefore we may be sure that in seven He will not forsake us. I said that the light of hope was the brightness from the face of God. I may say again, that the light of hope which fills our sky is like that which, on happy summer nights, lives till morning in the calm west, and with its colourless, tranquil beauty, tells of a yesterday of unclouded splendour, and prophesies a to-morrow yet more abundant. The glow from a sun that is set, the

Digitized by Google

experience of past deliverances, is the truest light of hope to light our way through the night of life.

One of the psalms gives us, in different form, a metaphor and a promise substantially the same as that of this text. "Blessed are the men who, passing through the valley of weeping, make it a well." They gather their tears, as it were, into the cisterns by the wayside, and draw refreshment and strength from their very sorrows. And then, when thus we in our wise husbandry have irrigated the soil with the gathered results of our sorrows, the heavens bend over us, and weep their gracious tears, and "the rain also covereth it with blessings." No chastisement for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

Then, dear friends, let us set ourselves with our loins girt to the road. Never mind how hard it may be to climb. The slope of the valley of trouble is ever upwards. Never mind how dark the shadow of death which stretches athwart it is. If there were no sun there would be no shadow; presently the sun will be right overhead, and there will be no shadow then. Never mind how black it may look ahead, or how frowning the rocks. From between their narrowest gorge you may see, if you will, the guide whom God has sent you, and that Angel of Hope will light up all the darkness, and will only fade away when she is lost in the sevenfold brightness of that upper land, whereof our "God Himself is Sun and Moon"—the true Canaan, to whose everlasting mountains the steep way of life has climbed at last through valleys of trouble, and of weeping, and of the shadow of death.

Digitized by Google

WORKS BY

ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D.D.

SERMONS PREACHED AT MANCHESTER. Ninth Edition. Fcap. 8vo. 4*s.* 6*d.*

"The style is always clear, simple, and effective, and frequently it rises to all the fervour of a glowing eloquence, and the discourses as a whole are well-fitted to quicken the religious thought and stimulate the devout feeling of a congregation."—*Nonconformist.*

A SECOND SERIES OF SERMONS. Sixth Edition. Fcap. 8vo. 4*s.* 6*d.*

The *Spectator* characterises them as "vigorous in style, full of thought, rich in illustration, and in an unusual degree interesting."

A THIRD SERIES OF SERMONS. Fifth Edition. Fcap. 8vo. 4*s.* 6*d.*

"Sermons more sober and yet more forcible, and with a certain wise and practical spirituality about them, it would not be easy to find."—*Spectator.*

WEEK-DAY EVENING ADDRESSES. Delivered in Manchester. Third Edition. Extra 8vo. 2*s.* 6*d.*

"Every sentence tells. The teacher preaches, and his preachings touch and lift all that is best in us."—*British Quarterly Review.*

THE SECRET OF POWER, AND OTHER SERMONS. Fcap. 8vo. 4*s.* 6*d.*

"Well worth reading, and from them all may with advantage gather hints and suggestions."—*John Bull.*

MACMILLAN AND CO., LONDON.

Digitized by Google

MESSRS. MACMILLAN AND CO.'S PUBLICATIONS.

BY HIS GRACE THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY.

BOY-LIFE: its Trial, its Strength, its Fulness. Sundays in Wellington College, 1859-1873. Three Books. By E. W. BENSON, D.D., formerly Master; Archbishop of Canterbury. New Edition, with Additions. Crown 8vo. 6*s*.

NEW BOOK BY THE AUTHOR OF "ECCE HOMO."

NATURAL RELIGION. By the Author of "Ecce Homo." 8vo. 9*s*.

THE BIBLE AND SCIENCE. By T. LAUDER BRUNTON, M.D., D.Sc., F.R.S., &c. With Illustrations. Crown 8vo. 10*s*. 6*d*.

A SECOND SERIES OF SERMONS. By THOMAS BINNEY, D.D. Edited with Biographical and Critical Sketch, by the Rev. HENRY ALLON, D.D. With Portrait of Dr. Binney engraved by JEENS. 8vo. 12*s*.

THE CANDLE OF THE LORD, AND OTHER SERMONS. By the Rev. PHILLIPS BROOKS, Boston. Crown 8vo. 6*s*.

"It is a notable volume among the sermons of the year."—*British Quarterly Review.*

SERMONS PREACHED IN ENGLISH CHURCHES. By Rev. PHILLIPS BROOKS, Boston. Crown 8vo. 6*s*.

THE DECAY OF MODERN PREACHING. By Rev. J. P. MAHAFFY, M.A., Trinity College, Dublin. Crown 8vo. 8*s*. 6*d*.

"Clever and sensible in most of its criticisms and suggestions."—*Saturday Review.*

"It is full of sound sense and practical hints which the clergy would do well to lay at heart."—*Pall Mall Gazette*

A LITTLE PILGRIM: In the Unseen. Crown 8vo. 2*s*. 6*d*.

"This little prose poem."—*Academy.*

"No writing of the kind has been more talked about since the publication of 'The Gates Ajar.'"—*Literary World, Boston, U.S.A.*

THE NEW TESTAMENT IN THE ORIGINAL GREEK. The Text Revised by B. F. WESTCOTT, D.D., and F. J. A. HORT, D.D. 2 vols. Crown 8vo. 10*s*. 6*d*. each.

VOL. I. TEXT. VOL. II. INTRODUCTION AND APPENDIX.

"The Greek Testament as printed by the two Professors must in future rank as one of the highest critical authorities amongst English scholars."—*Guardian.*

THE GREEK TESTAMENT AND THE ENGLISH VERSION, A COMPANION TO. By PHILIP SCHAFF, D.D., President of the American Committee of Revision. With Facsimile Illustrations of MSS. and Standard Editions of the New Testament. Crown 8vo. 12*s*.

MACMILLAN AND CO., LONDON.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

MAY 9 1976

JUN 30 1983

Digitized by Google